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Exploring Union Renewal in France: An Ethnographic Study of  
Union Activists in SUD-Rail

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Industrial and Business Studies

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## Table of contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....   | 3   |
| Declaration .....  | 4   |
| Abstract .....   | 5   |
| List of Abbreviations.....   | 6   |
| List of Tables and Figures.....  | 7   |
| Chapter 1: Introduction .....  | 8   |
| Researching French trade unionism.....   | 9   |
| Trade unions: from decline to renewal and revitalization.....  | 17  |
| The social construction of collectivism.....   | 27  |
| Thesis aims.....   | 34  |
| Thesis outline .....   | 36  |
| Chapter 2: Trade unionism in France and the significance of the SUD movement for union renewal ..... | 39  |
| Introduction .....   | 39  |
| The roots of trade union divisions and the emergence of the SUD movement.....                        | 41  |
| Dimensions of the trade union ‘crisis’ in France and the SUD unions’ response..                      | 60  |
| Summary and research questions .....   | 88  |
| Chapter 3: Researching unionism in France .....  | 93  |
| Introduction .....   | 93  |
| Applying framing to trade union research .....   | 94  |
| Ethnography and thick description.....   | 101 |
| A reflexive account of participant observation .....   | 105 |
| Initial research and key informants .....  | 109 |
| Finding a role in ethnography .....  | 122 |
| Researching in a foreign country: language and customs.....  | 126 |
| Data collection, analysis and interpretation .....   | 130 |
| Chapter 4: Trade union organisation in the railways .....  | 135 |
| Introduction .....   | 135 |
| Industrial relations in the railway sector .....   | 135 |
| Regional level industrial relations and union organisation.....                                      | 149 |
| The regional union office and activists’ profiles.....   | 157 |
| Contextualising the research .....   | 169 |
| Notes and structure for narrative chapters .....   | 173 |
| Chapter 5: Developing and sustaining participative democracy.....                                    | 175 |
| Introduction .....   | 175 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Activists' influence in the regional union .....                                       | 176 |
| Building participative democracy .....   | 187 |
| Processes of decision-making .....   | 201 |
| Participation in the regional union .....  | 212 |
| Discussion and conclusions .....   | 218 |
| Chapter 6: Membership and replenishment of activists.....                              | 222 |
| Introduction.....  | 222 |
| Members' reasons for joining the regional union .....                                  | 223 |
| Members' role and activist recruitment strategies .....                                | 226 |
| Training of new members .....  | 235 |
| Discussion and conclusions .....   | 242 |
| Chapter 7: Developing and maintaining links with workers.....                          | 246 |
| Introduction .....   | 246 |
| Role of representative institutions.....   | 247 |
| Training representatives .....   | 252 |
| Practices of union rounds .....  | 263 |
| Practicing representative roles: grading negotiations .....                            | 268 |
| Union competition in the workplace .....   | 275 |
| Turnover of worker representatives .....   | 279 |
| Discussion and conclusions .....   | 281 |
| Chapter 8: Developing and sustaining an adversarial approach .....                     | 285 |
| Introduction.....  | 285 |
| Union documents and propaganda .....   | 286 |
| Practices of mobilisation and direct action .....                                      | 291 |
| Defending and mobilising precarious workers .....                                      | 304 |
| Discussion and conclusions .....   | 316 |
| Chapter 9: Union renewal in France: discussion and conclusions.....                    | 318 |
| Thesis overview .....  | 318 |
| Constructing and sustaining collective organisation, interests and identity .....      | 319 |
| Inter-activist framing processes .....   | 324 |
| Activist-constituent framing processes .....   | 328 |
| Framing processes for other interest groups .....                                      | 333 |
| The extent and nature of trade union renewal in France .....                           | 334 |
| Broader lessons on the nature and prospects for union renewal and revitalization ..... | 341 |
| Thesis contribution and proposal for further research .....                            | 347 |
| Reference List .....   | 351 |



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## Declaration

I declare that this thesis is all my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university.



## Abstract

This thesis considers the nature and extent of union renewal in France through an ethnographic case study of the breakaway trade union movement '*Fédération des Syndicats Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques*' more commonly known as *SUD*. The research was conducted in a local level union of SUD-Rail, a union which emerged in the French public railway sector in 1996 from an ideological split with one of France's largest trade union confederations, the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT). As with other SUD trade unions, SUD-Rail emerged with the stated aims to renew and revitalize French trade unionism. In the context of trade union decline and even 'crisis', this research considers to what extent and how the union was able to extend its membership base, replenish activists, maintain links with workers and develop and sustain collective organisation, interests and identity, in spite of the external and internal constraints. The research presents a *thick description* of trade unionism at the local level and the findings show how activists make attempts to confront and renew existing practices and structures in trade unionism.

Overall, the evidence suggests that, in support of existing research on SUD trade unions in various sectors, there has been a partial renewal of trade unionism in the railway sector from the emergence of SUD-Rail. SUD-Rail has been able to influence the industrial relations context and challenge existing trade union identities, practices and organisation. The union has been able to organise previously unorganised workers, replenish activist members and combine an engagement in local as well as more global issues. The research demonstrates how this was achieved through a continuous set of frame alignment processes where activists sought to legitimise and encourage some level of support in the union. However, this research brings to light the tensions in the approach adopted by the SUD unions. To an extent the union could be seen to be *reproducing* features of the very form of unionism that it sought to confront, including low membership levels and tendencies towards *institutionalisation* and *bureaucracy*. This research shows that there are limits to renewal and revitalization which reflect the context of industrial relations and traditions in trade unionism in France. However, they also reflect the universal and perennial dualisms within trade unionism between *democracy and bureaucracy* and between *movement and organisation*. This research has shown how these tensions are dealt with in the day-to-day of activities in SUD-Rail.

This thesis contributes an in-depth study of the social processes of developing and sustaining trade union renewal in France. The research develops the union renewal debate by helping to further understand how the choices and actions of actors mediate and influence the processes towards building and sustaining collective organisation and identity. The thesis demonstrates the utility of the framing processes concept for organising and analysing the ways in which collective interests and identity are or are not developed and sustained, which has important implications for the prospects of building and sustaining trade union renewal.

## List of Abbreviations

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| AC!     | Agir ensemble contre le chômage   |
| ATTAC   | Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens          |
| CA      | Conseil administrative  |
| CE      | Comité d'entreprise   |
| CFDT    | Confédération française démocratique du travail                                 |
| CFTC    | Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens                              |
| CGT     | Confédération générale du travail   |
| CGTU    | Confédération générale du travail unitaire                                      |
| CGC-CFE | Confédération française de l'encadrement - confédération générale des cadres    |
| CHS-CT  | Comités d'hygiène de sécurité-conditions de travail                             |
| CRC     | Cordonner, rassembler, construire   |
| DP      | Délégué du personnel  |
| DS      | Délégué syndical  |
| ETF     | European Transport Federation   |
| ETUC    | European Trade Union Confederation  |
| FEN     | Fédération de l'éducation nationale   |
| FGAAC   | Fédération générale autonome des agents de conduite                             |
| FO      | Force ouvrière  |
| FSU     | Fédération syndicale unitaire   |
| LCR     | Ligue communiste révolutionnaire  |
| LO      | Lutte ouvrière  |
| MEDEF   | Mouvement des entreprises de France   |
| PCF     | Parti communiste français   |
| SNCF    | Société nationale des chemins de fer français                                   |
| SNCS    | Syndicat national des cadres supérieurs   |
| SUD     | Solidaires, unitaires et démocratiques  |
| SUD-PTT | Solidaires, unitaires et démocratiques – poste, téléphone et télécommunications |
| UNSA    | Union nationale des syndicats autonomes   |



## List of Tables and Figures

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Figure 2.1 Chronology of French trade unionism.....                               | 43  |
| Table 2.1 Trade union membership and workplace election support in 2005 .....     | 64  |
| Figure 3.1 An interactional model of framing processes .....                      | 96  |
| Figure 3.2 Chronology of research observations .....                              | 111 |
| Figure 4.1 Chronology of industrial relations in the French railways .....        | 136 |
| Table 4.1 SUD-Rail membership density 1996-2004 .....                             | 141 |
| Table 4.2 Economic and social roles of the works council.....                     | 146 |
| Table 4.3 Time resources from elected positions.....                              | 147 |
| Table 4.4 Representative election results in the railways 1996-2004 .....         | 148 |
| Table 4.5 SUD-Rail election support 1996-2004.....                                | 149 |
| Table 4.6 Employee breakdown and union members in the region of research .....    | 150 |
| Table 4.7 Union members in the regional union 1996-2004 .....                     | 151 |
| Figure 4.2 Structure of union organisation in SUD-Rail .....                      | 152 |
| Table 4.8 Workplace elections results for the regional union.....                 | 154 |
| Table 4.9 SUD-Rail election support by section and number of representatives .... | 156 |
| Figure 4.3 Biographies of activists.....  | 160 |
| Table 5.1 Executive meeting agenda items.....                                     | 189 |

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores the nature and extent of union renewal in France through ethnographic research on activists in a trade union from the breakaway movement ‘*Fédération des Syndicats Solidaires, Unitaires et Démocratiques*’ (herein referred to as SUD). This union movement emerged with the stated intention of revitalising unionism by mobilising new collectivities and energising workplace union structures. This thesis is concerned with understanding how a SUD union has gone about implementing its approach to revitalise unionism and the successes and obstacles that they experience in trying to sustain processes of union renewal. At a theoretical level the thesis is concerned with understanding the social processes underlying collectivism at the local level and the role of workplace union leadership in the processes of collectivisation. In this introductory chapter, the first section provides an overview of the thesis and explores why France and SUD are important subjects for research on union renewal. The second section introduces the broader analytical context of this research and the final sections present the aims of the research and a detailed chapter outline. The main aim of this chapter is to present the debates and frameworks for exploring the nature and extent of union renewal and the most appropriate analytical devices for exploring union renewal in France. The first set of ideas draw on studies in union renewal and revitalization, which suggest that for union renewal there is a need for an increase in worker engagement in unionism and at the same time a need to develop strategies to broaden the perspective of trade unionism. A theme common in these debates is the importance of leadership for



constructing and sustaining collective interests and identity. An approach for exploring the role of leadership is presented in the second, more specific set of ideas, which draw on mobilisation theory and account for the micro-social processes of collectivism and how collective interests and identity are constructed and sustained by activists in the workplace. These frameworks provide some of the underlying assumptions and organising concepts for the thesis. This thesis focuses on workplace activism in the union SUD-Rail with ‘framing’ as the key analytical device. This introductory chapter and the following two chapters demonstrate the particular importance of exploring workplace activism and framing in the SUD movement.

### **Researching French trade unionism**

This thesis is based on case study research in SUD-Rail, a union federation created in 1996 by a group of railway union activists from one of the largest union confederations in France, the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT). SUD-Rail forms part of a wider SUD movement, which comprises over 50 union federations adopting the ‘SUD’ identity. The majority of the SUD unions have been formed by breakaway groups from the CFDT, with the first being created in 1988 in the postal and telecommunications sector (SUD-PTT). The SUD unions are considered novel on the French trade union landscape as they have rejected existing union structures and types of action and they seek to revitalize trade union democracy and to rekindle a form of militant unionism and direct action at the local level. They have also been identified with a social movement model of unionism, basing their collective struggles around employment and social themes, and developing strong links with broader social movements, such as the unemployed and

anti-globalisation movements (Damesin and Denis, 2005). The SUD model of unionism has been influenced by a generation of activists formed in the protest movements of 1968, who saw the creation of SUD as an opportunity for a new form of union action (Sainsaulieu, 2006). The SUD unions' approach has been relatively successful and they have achieved rapid growth in the sectors in which they have emerged, both in terms of membership and support in workplace elections. Therefore, the SUD unions, having the explicit aims to confront and change structures and practices in trade unionism in France, provide an ideal context for examining the possibilities and obstacles for renewal in the French trade union movement.

The question of union renewal is particularly significant in the context of France as literature on French trade unions since the mid-1980s has centred on the union movement's 'decline' and 'crisis'. This analysis appears credible considering that France has the lowest membership density and one of the most divided union movements in Europe. It is for these reasons that French trade unionism has been depicted as an anomaly in European trade unionism and has been largely absent from comparative studies on union renewal and revitalization. Conflict and legal intervention, rather than collective bargaining have been the traditional modes of 'rule-making' in the sphere of employment relations and both employers and unions have been strongly driven by ideological considerations, and characterised by organisational weakness. Amadieu (1995) argues that the French trade union movement has several 'handicaps': weak and divided trade unions; too many and ineffective employee representation bodies; too many levels of collective bargaining; ineffective industry-wide agreements; no joint settlements of labour disputes; and



industrial conflict. The 'exceptionalism' of French trade unionism has been disputed by Rojot (1989) who argues that features of the movement, such as the importance of politics and ideology have been exaggerated and that certain characteristics, such as low membership, represent 'extreme points on a range of characteristics shared by industrial relations in most western developed countries' (1989: 77). It is clear that trade unions in other European countries have gone through similar periods of membership decline and trade union restructuring (Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999), but in no other country in the industrialised world is union membership as low or the union movement as divided as it is in France.

French industrial relations have attracted the attention of researchers outside France, either in the context of comparative research (Contrepois and Jefferys, 2004; Gallie, 1978; 1983; Lange et al, 1982; Thornley et al, 1997) or as a single country study (Batstone, 1978; Bridgford, 1991; Smith, 1987). A traditional explanation for the exceptional nature of French trade unionism has been the relative importance of union ideology and politics. Gallie's (1978; 1983) classic study of industrial relations in France and Britain highlights the heightened 'class' or 'political' consciousness of French trade unions when compared to British trade unions. He argues that the role of French trade unions, as class-oriented organisations, was to promote overall, long term worker interests rather than the 'pure-and-simple unionism' of defending particular and narrow craft or job interests as was the case for British trade unions. Bridgford (1991), in his single country study of France, also focuses on the political dimension of French trade unions during the 1970s, presenting intra-confederal and inter-confederal relations of the main trade union confederations and their relationships with the communist party (PCF) and the

socialist party (PS). Batstone (1978) and Smith (1987) move beyond the political dimension in an attempt to depict a more general picture of industrial relations in France during the 1970s and early 1980s. Batstone observes that workplace level industrial relations in France is reflected in the term 'arms' length bargaining', used to denote the limited significance of formal institutionalised negotiations at company level. The situation of arms' length bargaining in France demonstrates why there has been an importance attached to the political nature of trade unions as it arguably reflects the actual situation within French workplace trade unionism of the struggle for influence within the workplace, where in effect the management and unions reject the legitimacy of the other party. Smith (1987) also concludes that the political nature of French trade unions, which led to inter-union competition, was a dominant feature of industrial relations. However, at the workplace level he observes that the unions 'differed not so much in terms of what they wanted as in how they proposed to obtain it; they were divided over means rather than ends' (1987:178). He presents a rather bleak outlook for French trade unions, and he argues that the strategies adopted by the unions reflected an inability to overcome an internal 'crisis' in the union movement, which was characterised by union divisions and power struggles over resources.

However, more recent comparative research on France has moved away from discussions on the political nature of unions and has observed cross country similarities in the practices of workplace industrial relations and in the perceptions of activists towards contemporary issues such as restructuring (Hege and Dufour, 1995; Thornley et al, 1997). Jefferys (1996) argues that the strategic options open to trade unions in France and Britain are becoming increasingly similar in the context of the



similar pressures facing companies. Thus, is it possible to suggest that French unionism is becoming less of an anomaly in Europe? In light of the increasingly unfavourable environment for trade unions, can we argue that French trade unions are shifting from a politicised model of trade unionism to a more realist and pragmatic approach towards industrial relations? From the mid-1990s trends towards re-unionisation have been observed (Labbé, 2007) and more positive accounts have characterised recent union activity in terms of transformation and renewal (Contrepolis, 2003; 2007; Jeffery, 2003: 225). These accounts draw on evidence of a stabilisation of membership decline, continued high turnout in workplace representative elections, the growth in the number of workplaces covered by a trade union representative, and the continued representative and mobilisation capacity of trade unions (Boudesseul, 1996; Contrepolis, 2003; Dufour and Hege, 2002; Jefferys, 2003). However, with the continued fragmentation of the union movement, which is often based on ideological and political disagreements within existing unions, and the emergence of SUD, it could be argued that there is what has been termed a ‘persistent leftism’ (Bean, 1994) in France and the continued importance of ideas-based unionism (Daley, 1999). It has been argued that the continual emergence of new trade unions is evidence of a search for innovative and improved forms of collective organisation, representation and action (Jefferys, 2003). This thesis engages in these debates on the nature and extent of crisis and renewal in French trade unions. The thesis draws on the more optimistic accounts of trade unionism in France as starting points for research whilst exploring the question of the extent of the ideological and political nature of French trade unionism.

The findings on the SUD movement so far have been mixed. It has been argued that these unions have generated a renewed interest in radicalism and militancy amongst members of other unions and workers more generally, and that the movement has created an impetus for union leaders to renew their links with members (Sainsaulieu, 2006). However, it is also argued that whilst the SUD trade unions destabilised trade union practices in the first few years after their emergence, they are now facing the same challenges as traditional unions (Damesin and Denis, 2005). The SUD unions have become more moderate, pragmatic and responsible and activists, once in a position of responsibility, have adopted more conventional trade union practices. The unions are experiencing internal tensions and divisions and this is leading to a distancing from the rank-and-file and difficulties in building and sustaining participative democracy (Paccou, 2006; Pernot, 2003; Sainsaulieu, 2006). In addition, after significant gains in membership and workplace election support during the early years, growth in these unions has stabilised and their implantation has mostly been confined to the public sector. The movement has been open to criticism for defending the interests of privileged public status workers rather than the broader interests of workers. Therefore, existing analyses suggest that the SUD approach is limited and that a more widespread and sustainable renewal of French trade unionism seems unlikely to be achieved through this movement. Yet, in spite of the limitations to its approach the SUD movement has been able to build and sustain union organisation and remains at the forefront of organising and participating in collective action in France. In a broader context of union stagnation and suggestions of increasing worker individualism, the success of the SUD movement and its active attempts to deal with the tensions involved in building and sustaining the processes of union renewal deserves further analysis.



SUD-Rail is the second most important SUD union after the SUD-PTT in terms of size and level of implantation in the sector. The union emerged out of the important strike waves of winter 1995, having rejected the CFDT's reformist stance towards government initiatives and the confederation level's refusal to participate in the movement of 1995. The activists who formed SUD-Rail had been in opposition to the CFDT's confederal line since its policy of reformism (*recentrage*) at the end of 1970s. The CFDT's position in 1995 provided the catalyst for these activists to quit the confederation to form SUD-Rail, basing their organisation and identity on existing SUD unions. As with other SUD unions, SUD-Rail has built up its identity around participative union democracy at the local level, close links to workers and militant union action. Existing railway union confederations and management resisted the formation of SUD-Rail and the union had to undergo 130 legal proceedings in order to gain representative status in the railway sector (Paccou, 2006: 7). In spite of (and perhaps thanks to) this resistance SUD-Rail acquired around 5 percent of the votes in workplace representative elections in 1996 and after a successful legal process in December 1997, the Ministry of Transport awarded SUD-Rail representative status in the railway sector. In 1998 the union had a membership of around 3000 which increased to around 5000 in 2001, representing around 3 percent of railway workers (Damesin and Denis, 2005). The union increased its support in workplace representative elections from 6.5 per cent in 1998 to become the second most supported union in the railway sector union with 18.15 per cent in 2004. Workplace representative election results can be taken as a strong indicator of union support as turnout for workplace elections is around 80 per cent of the workforce in the railways. The origins of SUD-Rail in the conflict of 1995 and its

difficulties of gaining recognition have helped build and reinforce the union's radical identity and strategy towards industrial relations. Moreover, the other railway union confederations are viewed as increasingly reformist in their approach and SUD-Rail has arguably occupied the space left by these unions. It has been argued that the basis of the union's success has been in the union's approach of consistently taking radical positions and prioritising collective action over negotiation (Paccou, 2006).

At the time the field research began for this thesis, in late 2003, SUD-Rail was the fastest growing SUD trade union in terms of support in workplace representative elections. After nearly eight years of union experience, a case study of SUD-Rail allows us to explore attempts by trade union activists to build a new model of unionism, and to understand and explain the successes and obstacles towards sustaining union renewal. This thesis looks at how effective the actions of SUD-Rail have been in helping to revitalize trade unionism in the railway sector and what implications this has for renewal in French trade unionism more generally. In a comparative context this thesis seeks to draw out lessons from the French case to contribute to wider debates on union renewal. This thesis adopts the approach of *thick description* which allows for a detailed presentation and examination of the social processes of unionism in SUD-Rail. The research is based on an ethnographic study of unionism in a local level union of SUD-Rail. In light of the nature of unionism in the SUD movement and the conceptual approach adopted, a local level ethnographic study was considered the most appropriate for examining the processes of union renewal. From a survey of the literature there are gaps in our knowledge of the social processes of unionism in the SUD movement at the workplace level. This methodological approach is also supported by literature on French unions



(Contrepois, 2003; Dufour and Hege, 2002) and perspectives on union renewal and collectivism (Fairbrother, 2000; Kelly, 1998) which argue that the workplace level is critical to understanding the possibilities for union renewal.

### **Trade unions: from decline to renewal and revitalization**

In comparative studies in industrial relations the decline of trade unions has dominated analyses in many countries for more than two decades. The argument has been that since the mid-1970s, the economic and social role of trade unions has been challenged by a series of inter-related developments. These have included the increasing pace of economic internationalisation, the decline in the industrial sector and the increase of employment in the public sector and private services. There have been changes in the composition of the labour market to include more women and minority ethnic groups, and an increase in the number of people working on atypical employment contracts, such as part-time and temporary work. It has also been argued that the processes of social modernisation have eroded the traditional socio-cultural milieus that underpinned the strongholds of trade unionism and that the male ‘breadwinner’ model, on which much trade union organisation was based, has become increasingly inappropriate (Murray and Waddington, 2005: 489). In Europe the processes towards economic integration have led to changes in the way national economies are run and public companies have increasingly been opened up to competition with waves of privatisations occurring in the railways, gas and electricity and postal services. These combined developments are normally portrayed as key factors in the decline of trade unions and their weakened their capacity for action.

There are several indicators which appear to confirm the weakening of trade unions' thesis, with dramatic falls in membership density, a declining capacity for mobilization, based on members' reluctance to participate in union activities, and obstacles to unionisation in the growing private services sector (Frege and Kelly, 2003). Other problems include: a reduction of union members' interest in traditional union values; the erosion of structures of interest representation such as workplace unionism or works councils; institutional change, such as a reduction in bargaining coverage or weakening of links to political parties; and diminished power resources, for example, because of high unemployment (Frege and Kelly, 2003: 8). The extent of these problems has varied between countries, with a number of trade union movements experiencing some form of trade union 'crisis', and all movements being confronted by new challenges and choices. However, the experience is varied and only a minority can be said to have gone through a 'genuine crisis' (IRES, 1992). There have been significant falls in membership density in countries such as France, Spain, the UK and the Netherlands, but this trend is not universal, with union density remaining stable in Belgium and Nordic countries. Also, it is important to acknowledge that indicators have different meanings in different industrial relations contexts (Hyman, 2001a; Frege and Kelly, 2003). For example, the loss of membership may be a strong indicator for decline in Anglo-Saxon countries, where membership strength is the dominant source of union influence, but not necessarily for France and Spain, where other indicators, such as workplace election support, are perhaps better indicators for measuring union strength and representativeness. Furthermore unions in Belgium and Nordic countries are involved in the administration of social security benefits, for which union membership is sometimes



more advantageous. Thus the high membership densities observed in these countries do not necessarily reflect greater support for the values of trade unionism.

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that all trade union movements, albeit to varying extents, are losing their strength and influence, and are being forced to adapt to a fundamentally different external and internal environment. Over the last decade there has been a growing body of work exploring the innovations of trade unions in the face of decline, and the prospects and conditions for a renewal of unionism (see *EJIR*, 2003; Frege and Kelly, 2004; Fairbrother, 2000; Fairbrother and Yates, 2002; and also Fosh, 1993). The concepts of ‘renewal’ and ‘revitalization’ have been drawn upon to explain both the processes whereby unions address current problems in robust ways and the possibilities that might ensue (Fairbrother, 2005). The underlying assumption in these approaches is that unions have some discretion in how they react to their environment and that all trade union movements, albeit to varying extents, are responding to the problems they face. For example, there has been a stabilisation and in cases a reversal in the decline of membership density in some countries and this has often been the result of unions’ active responses to organise workers in new sectors and underrepresented groups. Organising strategies have been the focus of mainly Anglo-Saxon countries, as unions in these countries tend to rely on membership density as their main source of influence. Other possible strategies and tactics for union renewal suggested in the literature have included servicing, partnership at work, social partnership, community unionism and social movement unionism (Murray and Waddington, 2005). However, many European trade union movements have been slow to respond to threats to the relatively secure post-war model of trade unionism and unions have tended to rely on institutional

supports rather than developing proactive strategies for confronting problems such as declining memberships. The notable absence of France in many comparative studies on trade union renewal and revitalization is perhaps in part indicative of the lack of response from trade unions to respond to the decline in trade unionism.

There is a substantial literature on experiences of union renewal in the United States, which has in the main focused on ‘union organising’ as a path for renewal and revitalization (Bronfenbrenner et al 1998; Lopez, 2004). Authors have emphasised the need for unions to shift from a ‘servicing’ model towards a form of social movement unionism, with organising campaigns as a central strategy. This social movement model requires a ‘union-building’ approach to membership growth where the union fosters activism, leadership and organisation amongst workers which can provide a nucleus around which recruitment can occur (Bronfenbrenner et al, 1998 cited in Heery et al, 2003). With this approach trade unions take on the role of campaigning organisations, drawing on practices from social movements (Lopez, 2004). This approach strongly reflects the trade union context in the United States, where unions have sought to move away from the dominant ‘business unionism’ model in the face of renewed attacks from government and continuing membership decline. In contrast to the United States, UK approaches have focused on the more routine aspects of organising (Heery et al, 2000) and authors have argued that the conditions for union renewal lie in the generation of effective workplace level union organisation and member participation (Fairbrother, 2000; Fosh, 1993; Heery et al, 2003). In the context of the UK, Fairbrother (2000) suggests that there has been a decentralisation of industrial relations, which has increased the importance of workplace level union organisation, and is encouraging a process of union renewal



centred at the workplace level. Fairbrother's approach to union renewal identifies a set of processes concerned with union survival and development in the workplace. There are five organisational conditions for union renewal: recruitment and extension of the membership base; replenishment of new generations of activist members; building workplace and community relevant structures and activities; mutually supportive relations between layered levels of representation; and the combination of the local and the global. These conditions for renewal provide a framework for exploring the extent of unions' renewal efforts, with the point of departure being the workplace level. However, the extent to which current union activity in the UK can be characterised in terms of renewal has been disputed and the workplace level is considered as limited for the basis of union renewal as it ignores the broader more strategic context of unionism (Gall, 1998).

In comparative studies on revitalization it has been argued that in order to revitalise, unions need to broaden their perspective beyond the workplace level (Turner, 2004). The union revitalization perspective developed by Frege and Kelly (2003; 2004) identifies strategies that can broaden the perspective of trade unions and help to reverse the decline. Frege and Kelly (2004) identify six significant revitalization strategies in a comparative study of five countries: the UK, the United States, Germany, Italy and Spain. These strategies are *organizing, labour-management partnership, political action, reform of union structures, coalition-building and international solidarity*. The authors conclude that at the broadest level of generalisation the union movements observed focused revitalization effects on *mobilization or institutional position and/or reform* and this to a large extent reflected the institutional context of industrial relations in the respective countries.



For example, in the UK and the United States, where the unions' institutional position is relatively weak, union strategies have centred on mobilization including traditional militancy, organizing, coalition building and political action. In Germany unions have focused on protecting their institutional position and have defended collective bargaining, codetermination and the welfare state. Yet, with changing economic and political circumstances, German unions are now recognising that established institutions may not be enough, and that there is a need to develop mobilization potential in the face of institutional and organizational decline. In Italy unions have been able to maintain institutional strength whilst continuing to demonstrate vast mobilization capacity. Spanish unions have also shown impressive mobilization capacity and have been able to enhance their institutional position. In spite of differences in the focus of union efforts to revitalize, a common response observed in all of the countries was the unions' engagement in political action. Bacarro et al argue that 'unions are everywhere re-launching themselves as political subjects, as actors engaged not just in collective bargaining and workplace regulation, but also in the broader aggregation of political and social interests' (2003: 119). Thus the development of unions as political actors and as social movements is considered to be an important feature of union revitalization.

Frege and Kelly (2003) develop a model of union strategic choices, which aims to highlight the similarities and differences in revitalization efforts in different countries. The authors argue that in order to understand the deeper dynamics of union revitalization it is important to look at the 'cognitive' processes of how the union as an actor translates and acts upon changes in the environment. The model draws on social movement literature, which has often focused on weakly

institutionalised organisations and campaigning bodies and has emphasised the importance of internal debates around organisational aims and method and the ways in which issues are 'framed' by different actors. Recent challenges to the institutional stability and legitimacy of unions have drawn attention to the similarities between unions and social movements and reinforced the potential value of ideas and concepts from the social movement literature (2003: 13). The explanatory variables for union choices are: economic and social change, the institutional context of industrial relations, state and employer strategies, union structures and framing processes. The study demonstrates that the institutional context of industrial relations, particularly in relation to collective bargaining and corporatist arrangements explain some of the major differences between union movements, especially the importance of organising and political action. For example, in countries with high bargaining coverage, such as Germany, Italy and Spain, there is less incentive to organise than in the UK and the United States, where union membership and collective bargaining are more tightly linked (*Ibid*: 16). In addition, the strategies of the State and employers are shown to affect the degree and form of political action taken by unions and the degree to which unions focus revitalization efforts on bargaining reform. Union structures, comprising the number and degree of centralisation of peak level confederations, the contacts among unions and with other social movement, and the internal relationships between leaders and rank and file members, also influenced types of union action. The evidence suggests that more encompassing, centralised and unified peak level confederations facilitate political action and that dense workplace organisation, as evidenced in Germany for example, may encourage bargaining initiatives with employers (*Ibid*: 19). The empirical research conducted using this model of union strategic choice demonstrates that, the



institutional context, State and employer strategies and union structures helped to explain some of the major differences in union strategies.

A final explanatory factor is found in the variable of framing processes, which are defined as the ways in which unionists perceive and think about changes in their external context as threats or opportunities. Framing processes often 'express elements of a union's identity and draw from familiar ideas about union action' (*Ibid*: 14). Leaders play a critical role in the framing of issues and framing is shaped by the industrial relations context and union identities. Firstly, in relation to the industrial relations context, it is argued that unions in different countries frame the issue of membership decline as more or less important depending on the level of influence exerted by membership density. In the UK and the US, the importance placed on reversing membership density by union leaders can be said to have shaped the adoption and diffusion of the strategy of organising. In countries such as Italy (and France) where membership decline has had less of an impact on overall union strength, union leaders have stressed the importance of political action and mobilization capacity over membership recruitment. In these countries, where there are multiple peak confederations, it is membership and support in workplace elections in relation to rival confederations that is considered to be more important than overall membership density. Secondly, union identity influences the ways in which issues are framed by unions. Hyman (1994; 2001b) argues that 'identities may be viewed as inherited traditions which shape current choices, which in normal circumstances in turn reinforce and confirm identities'. Union identities can be oriented between market, class, and society (Hyman, 2001b) with more class-oriented trade unions likely to frame issues in political terms, whereas society-

oriented unions will interpret the best outcome to be compromise between social partners (Frege and Kelly, 2003). The ways in which union leaders interpret and frame their external environment is thus argued to have an important impact on the eventual strategies adopted by trade unions.

Frege and Kelly's approach is useful as it helps further understanding and explanation of the variety of strategies adopted by unions in different countries. The model outlines important influences on trade union strategies whilst also showing the interrelations between actors, structures and framing processes. It provides an encompassing framework for analysing the social construction of union choices and attempts to reconcile approaches focusing on structural, institutional factors for explaining union choices (Clegg, 1976; Martin and Ross, 1999; Poole, 1986) and those focusing on identity as determinants of union strategies (Hyman, 1994; 2001b). France has been notably absent in comparative studies on union revitalization (see *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 2003; Frege and Kelly, 2004). This thesis is an attempt to fill this empirical gap by engaging with the extent and nature of revitalization in the French trade union movement. Traditionally, French unions have engaged in strategies of political action with the aim of gaining legal rights for workers and building up their institutional position. The success of this strategy and the government intervention supporting the institutional development of trade unions has led to a relatively secure position for French trade unions. This secure position has meant that there has been less of a need to develop strategies of organising and reform of union structures. However, more recent evidence has shown that unions have engaged in organising and, in the case of the CFDT, the development of bargaining with employers. However, this 'reformist' stance at the confederal level



of the CFDT has led to the creation of the breakaway SUD unions by more radical wings of the trade union. These unions have sought to revitalize the movement using strategies of traditional militancy, political action and social movement unionism. This thesis considers the nature and extent of union revitalization strategies in France and, from a review of the literature in Chapter 2 and a discussion of the findings from the research in Chapter 9, proposed some explanations for the successes and failures of union revitalization in France.

Fairbrother (2005) critiques existing renewal and revitalization perspectives arguing that neither focuses adequately on the issue of union democracy. The most important attribute of Fairbrother's renewal thesis is a form of unionism where processes of mobilisation rest on participative and democratic procedures and practices. Trade union *revitalization* perspectives have tended to focus on strategic aspects of unionism and the bases of campaigning in trade unions, and have neglected the more routine nature of union organisation and activity. Whilst approaches to union *renewal* deal with questions of union organisation, union democracy has not been central to research conducted on union renewal (for an exception see Greene et al, 2003). Fairbrother argues that approaches to renewal should analyse the ongoing and contested tension between bureaucratised and democratised forms of organisation. There is an extensive literature on democracy in trade unions (Fairbrother, 1984; 2000; Fosh and Cohen, 1990; Hyman, 1975; 1979) and unions are often seen as exemplifying the entrenched leadership and conservative transformation associated with Michels (1915) 'iron law of oligarchy'. There has been a tendency observed for the objectives of members and union leaders to diverge and this is often linked to the ways in which many workplace unions become bureaucratised, routinised and

centralised (Fairbrother, 1984; Terry, 1993). The unrepresentative nature of trade unions has been a relatively recurrent criticism levelled at trade unions. For Fairbrother union democracy is a condition for union renewal and the case of the SUD unions is of particular interest as the movement has emerged contesting the lack of democracy in existing unions and the aim to develop participative democracy. Thus, the ways in which union democracy is constructed and maintained are a central consideration in this thesis.

### **The social construction of collectivism**

From the discussion thus far, it can be argued that union renewal depends largely on a renewed workplace engagement and the ability of leaders to construct and sustain a sense of collective identity and interests using strategies which seek to broaden the relevance of trade unions. However, in a time of a decline in worker collectivism, to what extent is this possible? The decline of trade unionism, in terms of density and the relative importance of trade unions as socio-political actors, is often interpreted as representing the decline of worker collectivism (Mückenberger et al, 1995). There are several interpretations of this alleged decline in the literature. The underlying assumption in many analyses is that there has been ‘a socio-cultural transformation whereby working class values of collectivism have given way to more individualistic orientations’ (Hyman, 1999). For Brown (1990), the growth of affluence, skills levels and geographical mobility have led to the ascendancy of ‘acquisitive individualism’ which precludes collective interests. Touraine (1966) has argued that the decline of the ‘workers’ movement’ forms a transition towards a ‘post-industrial’ society. With the changing nature of work to include new categories of workers and



the weakening of ties between work and social identities, Touraine argues that the workers' movement has become fragmented, and this precludes a total social movement. The underlying political project of trade unions has been in a state of disarray since the collapse of communism and traditional calls to worker collectivism and working class solidarity have become less salient as mobilising discourses (Hyman, 1994). Yet, analyses proclaiming the decline of worker collectivism tend to overlook several factors. Firstly, the interests traditionally defended by trade unions, often speaking on behalf of the labour movement, have tended to be those of the dominant demographic group in the labour market, typically male, white with a relatively secure labour market position (Hyman, 2001b). Employment has declined in these previously secure and highly unionised sectors, which has led to membership losses. Alongside this trend, there has been an increased diversity in the labour market to include a more heterogeneous spectrum of interests, which have previously been underrepresented in trade unions. Therefore, the losses in trade union membership can to an extent be explained by structural shifts in employment rather than an outright rejection of unionism (Hyman, 1994). It could be argued that the decline tells us more about the inability of trade unions to represent the interests of a more heterogeneous workforce than about the nature of collectivism itself. Furthermore, as Hyman states, trade unions have always faced the difficult task of harmonising and reconciling a multiplicity of particularistic interests and that the 'generation of solidarity has always been a project at best incompletely realised' (1994: 112).

A second factor overlooked in analyses proclaiming the decline of worker collectivism, is that collectivism can be conceived as a socially-constructed,

situationally-specific response to injustices and/or constructions of collective identity that are formed and sustained through the processes of interaction (Kelly, 1998). Whilst structural factors such as the level of unemployment and the content of labour legislation create a more or less favourable environment for the collectivisation of the workforce, they 'do not in themselves generate a sense of injustice or identity: those outcomes have to be constructed by activists or other opinion formers' (Kelly, 1997: 407). This approach to collectivism draws on the work of Kelly (1997; 1998), who has advocated closer links between industrial relations and social movement theory to help further understanding on the nature of collectivism. He has advocated a shift away from the traditional institutional analysis of trade unions towards exploring the nature and social processes making up the collectivisation of workers (Kelly, 1997; 1998). The key question in Kelly's work is how individuals are transformed into collective actors willing and able to construct and sustain collective interests and engage in collective action against their employers. This question has obvious relevance to studying and understanding the extent and nature of union renewal as the greater the willingness and ability to construct and sustain collective interests and action, the greater the chances are for union renewal.

Kelly's work draws mainly on Tilly's (1978) mobilisation theory and the approaches to collective interest definition developed by McAdam (1988) and Gamson (1992). Tilly's theory of mobilisation includes five components: interests, organisation, mobilisation, opportunity and the different forms of collective action. The key component is interests and the ways in which individuals come to define them (Kelly, 1997). The concept of organisation refers to the structure of a group and, in particular the extent to which power is centralized and the inclusiveness or scope



of representation, aspects which affect mobilisation capacity (*Ibid*). Mobilisation refers to the ways in which individuals are transformed into collective actors. The concept of opportunity refers to the balance of power between parties, the costs of repression and the opportunities available to pursue claims (*Ibid*). Finally, people must be willing to take collective action, the form of which can vary according to the balance between the other four components. The components of organisation and opportunity have to a large extent been covered by the frameworks in the previous section and reflect the more structural and contextual aspects of unionism, which have traditionally been a more frequent subject of industrial relations research than the components and processes of interests and mobilisation.

McAdam (1988) and Gamson (1992) have developed more specific frameworks for studying collective interest definition highlighting the roles of injustice, agency, identity and attribution in shaping the ways people define their interests. The critical factor in collective interest definition is for workers to develop a sense of injustice or illegitimacy. In addition, individuals must feel that they are entitled to their demands and that there is some chance the situation can be changed. Leaders play several key roles in the process of collective interest definition. Firstly, they use arguments to frame issues so as to promote a sense of injustice amongst workers. This process of persuasion involves the use of ‘collective action frames’ which are defined as ‘action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns’ (Snow et al, 1986). They either ‘underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable’ (Snow and Benford, 1992:137). Collective action framing is the attempt to link the ideologies, goals and

activities of the union to the interests, values and beliefs of workers (Snow et al, 1986). The abstract ideologies that circulate within the labour movement, such as varieties of Marxism or Christian socialism, play an important role in promoting a sense of injustice, as they help to supply a set of emotionally loaded categories and ideas for thinking about issues, events or situations (Kelly, 1998). Secondly, leaders encourage group cohesion and identity, which encourages workers to think of their collective interests in opposition to their employer. It is vital that aggrieved individuals blame an agency for their problems and that they have a sense of themselves as a distinct group defined in opposition to an 'out-group', which has different interests and values (Kelly, 1998: 29-30). Thirdly, leaders incite and justify the need for collective action and fourthly, they legitimise this action in the face of counter-mobilisation by employers.

These frameworks emphasise the socially constructed nature of collective interests and mobilisation and help us to better understand the presence or absence of collective organisation and action. The specific framework of collective interest definition provides a useful set of concepts with which to study the social processes of collectivism. However, studies on the construction of collective interests are not new to industrial relations. Batstone's (1977; 1978) research on shop steward organisation in the UK highlights the ways in which activists sought to shape workers' interests through a protracted process of communication, 'mobilisation of bias' and 'systems of argument'. Studies in industrial relations have also shown that workplace union leadership is an important part of studying collective organisation and participation in the workplace (Batstone et al, 1977; 1978; Darlington, 2001; Fosh, 1993; Greene et al, 2000; Kelly, 1997; 1998; Metochi, 2002; Taylor and Bain,



2003). Batstone's study remains an important starting point for studies of workplace union organisation, activism and leadership. The study identified types of leaders by assessing their commitment to trade unionism and their role as a delegate or representative in relation to their members. Darlington (1994; 2001) has built on this work but has emphasised the importance of left-wing leadership in processes of collective interest definition and union organisation, a factor which has often been overlooked in studies on union renewal. The influence of left-wing leaders in union organisation is particularly relevant in the context of France where it has been shown that ideology and politics continue to have an important influence in the labour movement.

This research follows on from studies which have focused on union activists as the key actors in constructing and sustaining collective interests and identity in the workplace. With the current social, political and economic contexts favouring worker individualism, researching the ways in which individuals continue to act and think collectively is an important area for research. It helps further understanding of the central problem in industrial relations of how workers come to define their interests in collective or individual terms, which has implications for the prospects for union renewal and unions' mobilising capacity. At a time when there is little prospect of support from employers and the state, unions need to look at what they can do to construct a restated interpretation of unionism that connects with the interests and convictions of a new, changing and diverse workforce. Approaches to union renewal argue that this requires new emphasis on workplace engagement (Fairbrother, 2000), and revitalization approaches (Frege and Kelly, 2003) remind us that to achieve workplace engagement requires leadership skills in constructing a

sense of collective identity among an increasingly diversified workforce and one that is no longer attached to the collectivist ideologies of the past. Drawing on the analytical device of ‘framing processes’, which is developed further in Chapter 3, this research seeks to describe, analyse and explain how collective interests and identity are (or are not) constructed and sustained. The guiding assumption is that collective interests and identities are socially constructed (Hyman, 1999) and formed and sustained through the social processes of workplace interaction and it is the process of construction that this research aims to explore. A collectivist orientation is not presumed to be a stable belief, idea or attitude held by individuals but is viewed as a response that is given meaning and constructed and reconstructed through interaction. The research will look at how this conceptualisation of the processes of sustaining collective interest definition and identity helps us to better understand the dynamics of unionism and the processes towards union renewal.

From this discussion it is argued that a consideration of the framing approach and the conditions for union renewal in the context of the SUD movement is particularly relevant. This movement is in the process of developing a specific identity and form of organisation in the face of highly competitive ideological unionism and in a more general context of union stagnation. This thesis looks at the ways in which the union is able to construct its identity and organisation and to shape workers’ views on the nature of unionism.



## **Thesis aims**

The first aim of this thesis is to contribute to comparative studies in industrial relations on the extent and nature of trade union renewal and revitalization. The research uses a case study of a union that set out to confront and change existing union practices, with broader aims to revitalize unionism in France. The thesis looks at the types of strategies taken on by the union SUD-Rail and explores the external and internal factors that help us to understand and explain these choices. An aim is to be able to contribute analytical generalisations on the nature of union renewal and revitalization in France for comparative research. The internal activity of unions is considered central to understanding processes of renewal. The second aim is to contribute to debates on the potential for the construction of collective interests and union identities in the contemporary workplace (Hyman, 2001b). The approach draws on mobilization theory where union leaders and activists are considered to play a key role in the processes of collective interest definition and identity (Kelly, 1997; 1998). The research aims to contribute to theory development in industrial relations by exploring the under-theorised role of union leaders in the processes of encouraging and sustaining the support, participation and mobilisation of constituents. This thesis explores and develops a conceptual and analytical set of tools for helping to better understand how trade union activists construct a collective identity and encourage the support, participation and mobilisation of constituents. The thesis employs the analytical and conceptual tool of ‘framing processes’, which has increasingly been used in studies on trade unionism and the process of collectivism (Frege and Kelly, 2003; 2004; Gall, 2003; Kelly, 1997; 1998). The

thesis explores the extent to which this concept is useful for understanding the social processes of collectivism and the nature and extent of union renewal.

The third aim is to contribute to debates on ‘crisis’ and ‘renewal’ in French trade unionism and to gain a greater understanding of the social processes that make up the engagement of activists in French trade unions. A review of the literature demonstrates that there are few empirical studies on French trade unionism attempting to look inside the ‘black box’ to present the day-to-day of union organisation and activism. A number of empirical studies have explored the ways in which unions at a local level have been confronting the variety of problems they face (Dufour and Hege, 2002; Contrepois, 2003). These studies demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the national level in attempts to understand the current state of the trade union movement and its future prospects. Yet, there are gaps in our knowledge on what trade union activists actually do, which may help further understanding on the situation of trade unionism in France and on the nature and extent of renewal. The thesis contributes to a growing number of studies presenting a dynamic portrait of trade union activism (Boudesseul, 1996; Contrepois, 2003; Sainsaulieu, 2006), which in the context of SUD, moves beyond analyses which examine this movement in terms of its contribution to the crisis and increasing division of French trade unionism. This thesis offers an in-depth study of union organisation and activity in SUD-Rail, and presents in detail the ways in which union activists sought to construct collective organisation and identity on a day-to-day basis. The thesis adopts an ethnographic approach, which enables the researcher to capture in detail the activity of trade unions at the local level. A further aim of the thesis is to explore the issues surrounding the use of ethnography and to contribute to



methodological debates on the role of researchers and implications of conducting research in a foreign country.

## **Thesis outline**

Chapter 2 locates the emergence of the SUD movement in the broader historical and contemporary context of French trade unionism. From a review of the literature it can be argued that there has been a partial renewal of trade unionism with the emergence of the SUD unions, with a new generation of members and activists to unionism, and a renewed sense of militancy and radicalism amongst workers. There has also been a conscious effort on the part of the SUD unions to confront bureaucratic and institutionalising tendencies. However, there are also signs that the SUD unions are facing tensions within their approach and are experiencing coercive pressures towards the very form of unionism they seek to confront. The institutional context of industrial relations and the traditions in trade unionism have been important explanatory factors for the situation of trade unionism in France. How the activists go about managing tensions in their approach and encouraging and sustaining a sense of collective interests and identity is the starting point for this research. The dominant level of researching trade unionism in France has been the national level, where the tendency has been to argue that there is a 'crisis' in French trade unionism, which is measured on the basis of mainly quantitative data. However, there has been a shift in focus towards the workplace level and an emphasis on qualitative research for measuring the health and strength of trade unionism. This has problematised dominant analyses of decline and 'crisis'. This

thesis attempts to build on this approach, in order to explore the health and strength of SUD unionism in the workplace.

Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual approach and methodology chosen for the research in the context of the discussions in Chapters 1 and 2. The framing processes approach introduced above is set out in greater detail and the particular value of the concept in France is discussed. The research methodology chosen was ethnography and this approach is justified in relation to the conceptual approach and the importance of qualitative research for understanding unionism in France. The thesis adopts *thick description*, which allows for an in-depth presentation of the social processes underlying renewal in France. A significant part of this chapter is dedicated to a reflexive account of my role as a participant observer in a regional union of SUD-Rail. In my account I highlight the methodological issues encountered throughout the research and reflect on the changing nature of my role in the field research. Chapters 4-8 explore activity in the regional union of SUD-Rail. Chapter 4 looks at industrial relations and union organisation in the railway sector. This chapter also describes in detail the context of industrial relations for the regional union of SUD-Rail, the biographies of the activists and sets the context for the research. Chapters 5-8 are organised in relation to the research questions set out at the end of Chapter 2. Chapters 5-6 focus mainly on organisational aspects of union renewal. Chapter 5 explores the roles of activists within the union and their levels of influence and the nature of decision-making and participation in the union in order to understand to what extent the regional union could be seen to be constructing and sustaining a form of participative democracy. In Chapter 6, the question of membership is explored, examining the ways in which the union sought to build up



membership and regenerate activist members. Chapter 7 looks at how the activists' developed and maintained links with workers and how they used their roles as elected worker representatives to construct an adversarial approach to industrial relations. Chapter 8 explores how the union developed a militant identity exploring the union's practices of mobilisation and encouraging collective interest definition and identity. Chapter 9 discusses the empirical research with an application of the framing processes approach which allows for an analysis of the processes for developing and sustaining collectivism in SUD-Rail. This chapter presents conclusions to the research and returns to the question of union renewal and the extent to which SUD-Rail reflects a renewal in the French trade union movement. The discussion picks up on the wider lessons that can be drawn from the research and presents the limitations and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: Trade unionism in France and the significance of the SUD movement for union renewal

### Introduction

From a survey of the small body literature on the SUD unions, it can be argued that the emergence of the SUD unions reflects a partial renewal of trade unionism in France. The SUD unions have encouraged a new generation of workers to become union members, there has been a conscious effort to implement policies to avoid *institutionalisation* and *bureaucratisation*, and the unions have been shown to have revitalized militancy and radicalism amongst certain groups of, mainly public sector, workers. They have based their identity on references associated with *class struggle* and seek to develop a social movement unionism with links to wider social movements and campaigns. However, the literature also highlights that the unions are experiencing tensions within their approach, which reflect wider tensions within the French trade union movement and beyond. In relation to the French context, the SUD unions are aiming to confront the tendencies towards *bureaucratisation* and *institutionalisation* at a time of low membership levels and an increasing number of institutional positions for a small pool of activists. The unions are attempting to build a unionism based on class struggle and mobilisation at a time when references to class have become less salient and strikes have reached lowest historical levels.



Firstly, this chapter considers the historical context of the SUD unions through a discussion of the ideological divisions that have traditionally characterised the French trade union movement. Secondly, the chapter analyses the extent and nature of the crisis in French trade unionism and examines how (and why) the SUD movement represents a response to the apparent crisis. This chapter identifies gaps in the literature concerning the underlying social processes of building and sustaining renewal in the SUD trade unions particularly at the local level. The literature on the SUD trade unions is restricted to a few authors, who concentrate mainly on SUD-PTT (Damesin and Denis, 2001; Denis, 2003; Pernot, 2003; Sainsaulieu, 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2006), with more limited research on SUD-Rail (Damesin, 2001; Paccou, 2006). These studies have mainly been based on in-depth qualitative research – at the local level, reflecting the locus of importance of the SUD’s approach – exploring general questions on the model of SUD unionism, its overall strategy and its place in the industrial relations system (Damesin and Denis, 2001; Damesin, 2001; Paccou, 2006) and more specific questions on union democracy in SUD-PTT (Pernot, 2003), the political orientations of SUD-PTT activists (Sainseulieu, 1999) and the SUD-PTT’s use of the legal system to forward its approach to unionism (Denis, 2003). The wider literature on French trade unionism since the emergence of the SUD unions consecrates a few pages to these relatively new organisations, but analysis is restricted to situating the movement within the contemporary union context. This chapter concludes that further research on the practices of the SUD movement and particularly the second largest and most successful SUD union, SUD-Rail, would help further understanding on the extent and nature of union renewal in France and on the processes for building and sustaining collective interests and identity.

## **The roots of trade union divisions and the emergence of the SUD movement**

In Europe a predominant characteristic has been trade union pluralism promoted by ideological, philosophical and religious differences (Bean, 1994). The decline in relevance of ideologies based around class and religion has had an important impact on the European trade union movement. For some countries, including France, this has had an even greater impact because of the extent to which trade unions derive their defining characteristics from their relationships with political parties and religious discourses, in the case of confessional unions. French trade unions have historically been divided along political and ideological lines. There are two ideological traditions, one stemming from the workers' movement, which produced the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) and *Force ouvrière* (FO) and the second from social Catholicism, which produced the *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC) and the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). Outside these traditions unions have formed around specific professions or categories of workers, including the *Confédération française de l'encadrement - Confédération générale des cadres* (CFE-CGC), formed after the Liberation to represent managers. In the contemporary trade union movement there are three other important union organisations at national level, originating from ideological splits in the major unions: the *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA), a reformist confederation created in 1994 and considered representative amongst public sector administrative workers; the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU), a radical federation also created in 1994 with representative status in education; and *Union syndicale – Solidaires*, a loosely



organised group of mainly radical unions, which comprises the majority of the SUD union federations. The main division in the contemporary trade union movement has been between the ‘reformist’ pole of unions, represented by the CFTC, the CFDT and the CFE-CGC and the ‘revolutionary’ pole, represented by the CGT, FO and the SUD trade unions. Pernot (2005) argues that the term ‘revolutionary’ is no longer a pertinent category and that the CGT, FO and the SUD unions are perceived more as ‘radical’ or protest-oriented unions, having abandoned much of their revolutionary rhetoric. Sainsaulieu (1999:9) splits the union movement into three categories: the ‘regulationists’, the unions concerned with *social regulation*, which includes the CFDT, the CFE-CGC, the CFTC and FSU-UNSA; the ‘revendicatif’ (*protest*) unions, comprising of the CGT and the SUD movement; and an intermediate pole of the FO. However, the boundaries of these categories are fluid, with evidence of more reformist practices observed in the CGT and a radicalisation of the FSU and FO following the emergence of SUD (Pernot, 2005: 19). Sainsaulieu (1999) argues that the autonomous movements such as SUD often base their position around a rejection of the CGT and claim to be ‘apolitical’. These movements have renounced ideological references and societal projects, but rather than being considered as ‘yellow’ or company based unions, they have been characterised as ‘pink’ unions because of Trotskyite and anarchist influences and their broad, sometimes explicitly anti-capitalist and class-based, conception of trade unionism. The remainder of this section explores the historical background to the emergence of the SUD movement in the context of the evolutions in trade union ideologies in France. French researchers have examined the historical roots of French trade unionism as a way of understanding current features of the movement (Groux and Mouriaux, 1989; 1992; Pernot, 2005). It is argued that the historical evolution of trade union ideology in

France allows us to better understand the approach of the SUD movement. The SUD unions have sought to revitalize ideas and practices in trade unionism, which have at different times throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century been adopted by the traditional trade union confederations. The SUD unions have been inspired by the principles adopted in the Charte d’Amiens by the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in 1906 and the practices of direct action which has been a trait in the movement from its origins. Thus, certain features of the SUD movement’s approach reflect existing traditions within French trade unionism. The main argument is that the dominant trade union confederations have increasingly abandoned references to class struggle and adopted more reformist practices and ideas, which has left space for the formation of radicalised movements such as the SUD unions inspired by the ideas-based tradition in French trade unionism.

**Figure 2.1 Chronology of French trade unionism**

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 1884          | Legalisation of trade unions  |
| 1895          | Creation of the CGT   |
| 1906          | Adoption of the Charte d’Amiens by the CGT                              |
| 1919          | Creation of CFTC  |
| 1921-<br>1922 | Creation of the CGTU from split with the CGT                            |
| 1936          | Reunification of CGT and CGTU   |
| 1944          | Creation of CGC-CFE   |
| 1947-<br>1948 | CGT-FO and FEN formed from splits from the CGT                          |
| 1964          | ‘Deconfessionalisation’ of CFTC with 90 percent of members forming CFDT |
| 1966          | Joint action between the CGT and CFDT                                   |



|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 1968          | Student protests and general strike  |
| 1970          | CFDT adopts workers' control (' <i>autogestion</i> ')                                |
| 1977-<br>1978 | Beginning of policies of ' <i>recentrage</i> ' by the CFDT                           |
| 1981          | Creation of 'Groupe des dix' by autonomous trade unions                              |
| 1989          | Creation of SUD-PTT and CRC- Santé from splits with the CFDT                         |
| 1992-<br>1993 | Break-up of FEN to create UNSA and FSU   |
| 1995          | Joint action between CGT-FO-FSU against social reforms; CFDT supports social reforms |
| 1996          | Creation of SUD-Rail from a split with the CFDT                                      |
| 1998          | Congress of 'Union syndicale Groupe de Dix'  |
| 1999          | CGT breaks links with the French Communist Party                                     |
| 2001          | Adoption of common identity for Union syndicale Groupe de dix 'Solidaires'           |
| 2004          | Union syndicale drops 'Groupe de dix' to become 'Union syndicale Solidaires'         |

The first ideological tradition in French trade unionism was inspired by the workers' movement. After the French Revolution in 1789 all associations of employers and employees were outlawed, in the name of individualism and economic liberalism. As shown in Figure 2.1, trade unions were legalised in 1884, but their development was hindered for several reasons. Firstly, the slow industrialisation of France resulted in a weak and scattered working class. Secondly, where unions did exist they were met with the hostility of the state and employers. Despite their weakness and their small numbers of activists, local unions grew into federations and the first union confederation in France, the *Confédération générale du travail*, was founded in 1895 and was the dominant trade union confederation for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The weakness of trade unions up until World War II is viewed as an outcome of the refusal of the business and conservative classes to grant recognition

to them (Lipset, 1983: 10). This is argued to have reinforced a tendency to see society in terms of class struggle. Revolutionary syndicalism was the prevailing tendency within French trade unionism up until the First World War. The refusal of the state to grant the trade unions a legitimate role as bargaining agents in the economy meant that trade unions required a revolutionary ideology to motivate membership and leadership participation and thus sustain their organisation. The CGT found this ideology in syndicalism, which emphasised the importance of workers spontaneous self-activity, local autonomy and independence from political parties (Lipset, 1983). The CGT formally adopted revolutionary syndicalism in 1906 at the Congress of Amiens<sup>1</sup>. The CGT stressed its independent action, formally rejecting the notion of parliamentary socialism in its resolution of neutrality in the Charte d'Amiens:

...the congress declares that, in order that syndicalism may attain its maximum effect, its economic action should be carried on directly against the employer, the federated organisations having, as labour organisations, nothing to do with parties and sects, which, outside its sphere, are entirely at liberty to seek the transformation of society.

From its foundation, the central policy of the CGT was direct action, using strikes as their main weapon. The aim of this policy was to encourage mobilisation for general

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<sup>1</sup> Document adopted in 1906 at the Congress of the General Confederation of Labour, which expounded the Confederation's doctrine. It has had a profound effect on the trade union movement in France through its extolling of direct action by labour, furthering the education of the workers, its rejection of all links with political parties and its criticism of the State. It was a treatise on anarcho-syndicalism. Abandoned in 1914 when the CGT rallied to the united cause against Germany, this doctrine has nonetheless left deep marks that are still visible today: weakness of discipline, high regard for militancy and dedicated conviction, together with the creation of a workers' élite that this allows, distrust of parliamentary action, etc (EMIRE).



strikes, which were seen as the climax of protracted periods of direct action. The underlying idea being that 'revolution is a work of every moment of today as well as tomorrow: it is a continuous movement, a daily battle, without truce or respite, against the forces of oppression and exploitation' (Pouget cited in Skelton, 1909: 140). The CGT's approach was explicitly anti-capitalist and, whilst the union sought to defend workers' immediate interests, the decline in working hours and increases in salaries for example, the CGT sought the emancipation of workers and the end of capitalist system, with the union forming the foundation for production and distribution in the eventual reorganisation of society. The adoption of syndicalism had several consequences for the French trade union movement. With the focus on local autonomy, it committed the union to a loose, unstable and relatively non-bureaucratic organisation. This structure in turn required the unions and their leaders to stress ideology at the expense of building loyalty on the basis of concrete gains through collective bargaining (Lipset, 1983). These are two features of unionism which continue to have an impact on the structure and actions of contemporary trade unionism in France. Unions remain highly decentralised and even with a decline in partisan attachments, the stress on ideology for motivating membership and mobilisation remains important. The consequences of these traits in French trade unionism are developed further below.

The CGT experienced its first ideological crisis shortly after 1906 following the failure of two general strikes. In 1909, without renouncing the practice of direct action, the union pronounced itself in favour of social reforms. With the onset of the First World War the union abandoned anarcho-syndicalism and rallied to the united cause against Germany, and the union began a process of integration within official

organisms (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). After the First World War the CGT experienced internal divisions between pacifists and revolutionaries. The revolutionary trade unionists split from the CGT to form the CGTU in 1920-1921. The CGTU recognised the role of the communist party within the trade union, while the CGT retained its ideology of independence from political parties. With the reunification of the CGT and the CGTU in 1936, communist party influences remained and strengthened within the renewed composition of the CGT (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). The influence of the communist party dominated the CGT from 1947 and the rejection of this influence by certain groups in the union led to divisions in the CGT and the creation of FO and the FEN in 1947-1948. The CGT nonetheless claimed that it was independent from the French Communist Party and with the traditions of revolutionary syndicalism and the principle of union independence from the Charte d'Amiens, the CGT, rather than acting as a transmission belt for the party, managed to maintain a level autonomy. From the Second World War up until the 1970s the CGT identified its approach with 'mass and class unionism'. This reflected the union's ideology and protest strategy of organising workers on a broad basis and making them aware of the opposition between capital and labour and engaging them in the class struggle (Pernot, 2005: 194-195). Through the 1980s the union became increasingly isolated and suffered sharp declines in membership and popularity. With the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the consequent loss of communist reference for the CGT, the confederation entered a period of reflection. As of 1992 the confederation began a process of renewal, distancing itself from the French Communist Party and increasingly engaging in negotiation. The CGT cut remaining links with the French Communist Party in 1999 and the union no longer associated itself as a union of 'class struggle', but as a union based on 'propositions'.



This shift ended the CGT isolation and brought its approach closer to the more reformist unions, including the CFDT. The CGT consequently gained membership to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which had been previously been contested by the CFDT and FO because of communist influences. However, some authors have argued that the CGT still relishes conflict and that its renewal has been contradictory (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000; Daley, 1999: 190). Andolfatto and Labbé (2000) argue that since 1999, there are now more communists within CGT leadership than ever before. Furthermore, 72 percent of Communist Party members claim to be union members, with 82 percent members of the CGT. This suggests that communist political influences within the CGT continue to be significant, at least among members and activists.

Trade union pluralism was established in the French trade union movement shortly after the end of the First World War. The Catholic tradition in French trade unionism produced the CFTC in 1919, which was created largely as a reaction against communist and socialist influences in the trade union movement. Unlike the CGT, the CFTC accepted the legitimacy of the capitalist system and the cooperation between capital and labour (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). After the Second World War, pressures grew within the union to remove Catholic references, and in 1964 the CFTC became the CFDT taking 90 percent of the CFTC membership. The CFDT retained many of the CFTC's holistic values, but sought to reinforce the principle of trade union independence, particularly from the Catholic Church. The CFDT radicalised its approach after 'deconfessionalisation' embracing workers' self management (*autogestion*), and collective ownership of the means of production. The student movements of May 1968 provided the inspiration and

catalyst for this approach and consequently the CFDT adopted the values of conflict and direct action as the prime means for social transformation. The CFDT's approach brought it closer to the CGT with the two confederations signing a joint action agreement in 1966. During this period the CFDT's approach has been interpreted as a form of 'bottom-up' class struggle in contrast to the CGT, which embodied a more 'top-down', structured and controlled class struggle philosophy. This meant that the CFDT tended to be more radical and prone to action than the CGT, who had a more hierarchical structure and its action was confined by its Communist Party links (Jefferys, 2003: 67). With the CFDT's support for workers' self-management from 1968, Trotskyist groups concentrated their membership in the CFDT, which encouraged radicalism in the union.

As of 1975, with the breakdown of the 'Unity of the left' between the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, the economic crisis and the decline in trade union density, the CFDT and the CGT became increasingly divided. The CFDT changed its conception of trade union action and in 1978 abandoned the goal of social transformation and placed emphasis on negotiation and promoted the signing of collective agreements (Pernot, 2005). This period marked the beginning of the 'recentrage' of the CFDT with the shift in values from *class struggle* to the traditional CFTC values of *social regulation*. In 1982 the CFDT supported government policies of economic restraint and in 1984 the secretary of the CFDT declared that the strike was an outdated weapon (*'arme mythologique'*). The CFDT became increasingly centralised around the confederal executive and the reformist position was strengthened (Ibid). However, at the local level trade union practices in the CFDT remained varied, and there was resistance to the new orientation of the



confederation. In 1986 there was a second phase of 'recentrage' with the CFDT dropping all references to socialism (Mouriaux, 2005: 42). This shift in ideology had significant repercussions for the CFDT and for the French trade union movement as a whole. Trotskyist groups within the CFDT and activists influenced by references to workers' self-management and the approach of direct action from May 1968 became increasingly disenchanted with the CFDT's new orientation. These activists advocated a more 'combative' form of unionism disagreeing with the CFDT confederal level's promotion of concession bargaining and economic and social realism (Parsons, 2005; 58). Radical wings of the CFDT were inspired by the practice of the *coordinations* which were popularised during the conflicts in the railways and amongst students in 1985-1986. The number of *coordinations* multiplied in the CFDT in response to the conflict with the confederation level. This trend was observed in other countries in Europe in the 1980s, notably in Italy, where workplace committees were formed (COBAS) contesting the agreement signed by the larger union confederations. Movements in both countries had a high percentage of participants from the far left and were mainly created in the public sector.

The internal division in the CFDT heightened in 1988 when the Rocard government engaged in reforms towards privatisation in the postal and telecommunications sector. The reforms provoked widespread strike action against the reforms. Radical wings of the CFDT prolonged the strike movement with a majority support from members. However, the prolongation of the movement was not supported by the confederation level and activists engaging in the strikes within the postal and telecommunications sector were excluded from the CFDT. The excluded activists capitalised on the energy developed during the conflict to create a new force in the

union movement and in 1989 the first SUD union emerged in the postal and telecommunications, calling itself SUD-PTT, adopting the name of the founding principles of the CFDT, Solidaires-unitaires-démocratiques. Activists from the health sector also created a new union (Coordonner-rassembler-construire) which later became SUD-Santé (Solidaires, 2007). These newly formed unions made rapid progress in their sectors in terms of building union organisation and gaining support in workplace representative elections. Whilst wanting to move away from the confederal model of trade unionism, the negative image associated with autonomous unionism in France motivated the SUD-PTT to join the loosely organised ‘Group of 10’ confederation. This confederation has its origins in the post-war splits in the CGT when several unions refused the choice between the CGT and FO. In 1981 ten of these unions grouped together in a loose informal structure in an attempt to overcome the disadvantages of their narrow base. The Group of 10, like the SUD-PTT, has been concerned with defending public services, pensions, and the welfare state. Alongside this the organisation adopts an anti-globalisation and pro-Third World stance, and is involved in social movements organising the homeless and the unemployed in France. The organisation’s image is anti-capitalist and in favour of ‘an alternative economic logic’. The values of the G10 confederation are often set against the increasingly reformist stances observed in other confederations, such as the CFDT and UNSA. SUD-PTT was invited to join G10 in 1992 after which the confederation adopted federal statutes based on the notion of internal democracy where each member has one vote whatever the union’s size, and has a right of veto in national decision-making structures. The number of SUD unions within G10 reached 30 in 2004, and the confederation changed its name to Union syndicale – Solidaires to reflect a new composition of union members.



The overtly reformist stance taken by the CFDT had further repercussions in 1995, after which SUD-Rail, currently the second largest SUD union, was formed in the railway sector. In 1986 the government undertook measures towards reforming occupational protections associated with public sector status, which provoked significant strikes waves. In the railway sector the government's proposals were to introduce merit-based pay for train drivers and to make changes to the salary structure. The strikes were considered a success as the government withdrew the project. The 1986 strikes were characterised by local level *coordinations* in the railway sector. This was seen as a consequence of the distancing between workplace level concerns to defend occupational status and protections and confederal level strategies. In 1986, CFDT activists took part in strikes after the confederation had withdrawn support for the movement (Chevandier 2002: 333). The events of 1986 thus set the scene for the creation of SUD-Rail during the next important strikes waves in the sector in 1995. The major unions' concerns over non-union instigated action in the 1986 strike movement encouraged them to develop their internal democratic practices. However, the emergence of SUD-Rail from the 1995 strike waves demonstrates that the tensions between the confederal and local level became irreconcilable.

The government's attempts to reform the social security system provide the background to the 1995 strikes waves. The railway unions played a significant role in the movement overall and the government withdrew proposals for reforming the railway pension scheme under the pressure of the strike waves. The 1995 movement was characterised by the unions' emphasis on democracy, which was evidenced in

the importance of general assemblies in the workplace throughout the strike movement (Chevandier 2002:340). However, in 1995, as in 1986, grassroots *coordinations* built up during the movement, some motivated by wider grievances, some representing more specific interests, notably train drivers. The CFDT had encouraged the self-management of the conflicts at the local level, but there were disagreements at the grassroots level after the confederal leadership supported government pension reforms. In January 1996, when the strike movement had ended, local unions in the Paris region requested an extraordinary congress, which was refused by the CFDT's general secretary, Nicole Notat. During January and February 1996, between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of activists from local CFDT unions in the Paris region left to form SUD-Rail. In the beginning, SUD-Rail struggled to gain recognition in the SNCF, as management and unions tried to prevent the union from putting forward candidates for workplace representative elections. In spite of these actions, SUD-Rail gained around 5 per cent in the elections of March 1996 (Damesin, 2001). From a successful legal process, the Ministry of Transport declared SUD-Rail representative within the SNCF in December 1997. The union increased its support in the workplace elections of 1998 (6.5 per cent), 2000 (10.6 per cent), 2002 (12.74), and 2004 (18.15 per cent) and in 2001 the union had a membership of around 5000, compared to around 3000 in 1998 (Damesin and Denis, 2005).

The development and recognition of SUD-Rail amongst railway workers has largely been a factor of positions taken during social conflicts. The union has adopted a radical position which has been attractive to a number of railway workers at a time when other union confederations have preferred to negotiate. The radical nature of



their approach has gained sympathy from workers in a context of increasing uncertainty in the railway sector (Paccou, 2006). The shifting sympathies towards SUD-Rail can be understood in relation to the positions adopted by the other main union confederations during specific conflicts. In 1999 the CFDT and the CGT signed an agreement on the 35-hour week. SUD-Rail was against the agreement, with its position being a reduction to a 32-hour week with no loss in salary. SUD-Rail argued that it would not lead to the creation of a sufficient number of posts and would increase worker flexibility. The CGT's willingness to negotiate and the disillusionment of workers after the signing of the agreement led to a decline in support for the CGT in the workplace elections of 2000. SUD-Rail secured its position as the third most important union in the railway sector. Another important event for understanding the growth of SUD-Rail was the French government's proposals to reform pension schemes in 2003. This was a further attempt after 1995 to reform the general state pension, and the schemes for civil servants and the self-employed. The proposals included measures to lengthen working lives and contribution periods, and to introduce greater flexibility and freedom of choice for workers. The draft bill provoked strikes and demonstration by trade unions, particularly in the education sector. The government amended its proposals after the first wave of strike action, and the special pension schemes in publicly owned companies, the SNCF included, were excluded from the reforms. The CFDT's support of the government's proposals led to further departures of activists and an increase in support for SUD-Rail and the CGT. In the workplace elections of 2004, the CFDT experienced a drop of almost 10 percentage points, from 18.45 per cent to 9 per cent. However, this conflict marked the weakness of SUD-Rail at the inter-

professional level as the union lacked the support of the CGT and the CFDT to prolong strike action and SUD-Rail failed to make an impact at the national level.

Since 1988 the number of SUD unions has grown rapidly, with now over 30 SUD unions of various sizes across the public and private sector. The internal crisis in the CFDT has provoked the majority of the splits, with SUD unions being created in air transport, banks and large private companies, such as *Michelin* in 2001. It has also been argued that the CGT's recent shift towards reformist trade unionism, its rapprochement with the government and its desire for social peace has left an opening for the more radicalised stance adopted by the SUD movement, particularly in the public sector (Sainsaulieu, 1999). The SUD unions organise on the basis of occupation or company, and prioritise the federation level. However, they are also associated with the inter-professional confederation Union Syndicale – Solidaires. The SUD unions have been motivated to join a confederal structure to avoid isolation at the inter-professional level and accusations of corporatism from being federations based in specific companies and sectors (Damesin and Denis, 2001). With their engagement in both specific sectors and the inter-professional level the SUD unions mix occupationally based demands with the defence of broader social interests (Damesin and Denis, 2001:9). This is an area of concern for unions as they are faced with a contradictory position of highlighting the need for working class solidarity, whilst continuing to defend particular occupational groups. The growth of SUD trade unions has taken place at a time of change within the public services sector, including energy, rail, postal and telecommunications services, with the main discourse uniting them being the defence of public services (Denis, 2001; Sainsaulieu, 1999). The main criticism from the SUD trade unions has been that



privatisation means moving away from a public service ethic towards consumerism and a focus on profits. The SUD unions have played an important role in criticising and taking action against government policies and have defended a more traditional notion of the French model of public service. This includes a rejection of the quest for profits, an importance placed on keeping all work activity in-house and the necessity of the special status of workers for carrying out the work in the public sector company (Damesin and Denis, 2005).

SUD's stated conception of trade unionism is one of social transformation (Solidaires, 2007: 59), but the union rejects a single, general discourse in favour of a complex balance of ideas and policies (Sainsaulieu, 1999b). The unions have a wide range of concerns – political and social, quantitative and qualitative, materialist and post-materialist are mixed together. The unions success has been attributed to a strategy of identifying particular worker needs: the protection of salaries and working conditions (the CGT type), the more qualitative need for the reduction of working time and of racism (the CFDT type), and the more reformist need for career management and social causes (the FO type) (Sainsaulieu, 1999). The unions are also linked to a variety of social movement organisations and are involved in campaigns on wider social issues. Thus the SUD unions can be characterised as adopting a social movement union identity with the focus being mass support and campaigning (Hyman, 1994). Research based on the largest of the SUD unions, SUD-PTT and SUD-Rail (Damesin and Denis, 2001), concludes that the unions focus on revitalising a form of *confrontational* and *non-cooperative* unionism, and emphasise the need for collective action. Sainsaulieu (1999) argues that the SUD unions have attempted to revitalize the ideas and practices of the May 1968

movements in the contemporary context. Many of the activists in SUD (21 percent in SUD-Rail according to Paccou, 2006) belong to left-wing groups, including the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR), *Lutte ouvrière* (LO) or other anarchist parties. However, the SUD unions have been inspired by the Charte d'Amiens and claim independence from political parties (Solidaires, 2007).

The SUD unions' approach has been characterised in terms of 'pragmatic militancy' ('*contestation pragmatique*') (Sainsaulieu, 1998). In practice this approach tries to 'bridge the gap between reform and revolution, in using the range of resources offered by the system...and the art of radical militancy. This links radical conflict, strategic power, political demands on social rights, a grassroots presence, a strategy of communication, a sense of specific and general interests and legal expertise' (Sainsaulieu, 1999a:266). From their approach the SUD unions have spawned a renewed interest in radicalism and militancy amongst members of other unions and employees generally (Sainsaulieu, 2006). SUD's openness and integrative capacity are viewed to be factors of its success and it has been argued that SUD is attractive more in cultural than ideological terms for 'it provides each member with a meaningful experience without forcing everyone into the same mould' (Sainsaulieu, 1999b: 812). However, the lack of a transformational project makes the long-term synthesis and mobilisation difficult. There is no shortage of radical ideas and practices, but these are often focused on a single sector or company, thereby discrediting the class radicalism expressed by the unions. The SUD unions appear to act more as a 'thorn in the side of the powerful rather than construct a new social project' (Ibid: 813). It could be argued that the SUD unions' approach reflects what Hyman (1994) terms 'syndicalist opportunism', which, in the event of the loss of old



political ideologies, is a rejection of any political dimension to trade union practice. The loss of ideological perspectives in French trade unionism can be explained from Touraine's (1966) thesis on the 'loss of substance' in the working class movement. This thesis was expounded in the 1960s and is based on the idea that the development of the welfare state and the progressive integration of the manual working class within the rest of society have radically transformed social relations. Touraine argues that, with these fundamental changes in the nature of work and society, there has been a weakening of working class consciousness, which has lessened the relevance of trade unions. He argues that trade unionism is losing its central role as a class struggle actor and suggests that unions are becoming ordinary and banal, tending to be just one other form of collective institutionalised action among others. For Touraine, the mass strike movement of 1995 was confirmation of his thesis. Touraine regarded the strike movement of 1995 as a 'non-labour movement' as it was characterized by 'a complete absence of perspectives, program and analysis'. He criticises the trade unions for being defensive and lacking a social project (Touraine, 1996). Union syndicale – Solidaires is also criticised for its lack of propositions during the strikes against pension reforms in 2003. The SUD unions made calls for a general strike, without an evaluation of their weakness at the inter-professional level, particularly in the case of SUD-Rail. Since 2003, the SUD movement has tried to compensate for its weaknesses by denouncing the CGT as reformist and trying to develop its identity as a union of class struggle (Pernot, 2005). However, its implantation remains within the public sector and the SUD movement is often accused of sectionalism in its focus on protecting public sector workers. This reflects a paradox of collective organisation in that it simultaneously

unites and divides workers, since the boundaries of any individual union encompass only a section of the working class (Hyman, 2001b: 30).

Literature on the SUD unions would suggest that the SUD movement's confrontational approach has been successful and that this success is evident in the growth of support in workplace elections in their respective sectors. They have taken away support mainly from the CFDT, who has been seen to be supportive of reforms. However, the SUD unions' defence of public services has been problematic as, not being able to stop the processes towards privatisation, for example, in the telecommunications and energy sector and the opening up of freight transport to outside competition in the railways; the unions are increasingly representing the demands of workers in the public and the private sector. This is the case for SUD-PTT, now representing both private status telecommunications workers and public service status postal workers. The transfer of jobs to the private sector presents a problem for the SUD unions in terms of adapting their demands to meet the interest of workers in the private sector whilst also maintaining a representative position in the organisation by representing the demands of the core work group (Damesin, 2001). In the railways, the 'core' workgroups continue to have the public sector status of 'cheminot', but the unions also represent an increasing number of contract workers, who have private or semi-private status. The question is to what extent there is a tension between the SUD unions' class struggle rhetoric and the defence of sectional interests at the level of the rank-and-file. The 'pragmatic militancy' associated with the SUD movement suggests that at the level of the rank-and-file the SUD activists are able to manage this tension. The tension between wider union positions and local unionism is a common theme in trade unionism and UK unions have shown that with



a degree of autonomy local unions and their activists are able to manage this tension perfectly adequately. In the context of reforms in the railway sector, where threats to current occupational status and acquired rights have led to a heightened awareness of collective interests and action, the ways in which local union activists in SUD-Rail manage the tension between sectional interests and union ideology provides an interesting context for research. Further, in the context of the traditional importance of ideology in French unionism, it is interesting to consider to what extent 'union ideology' is a necessary component of workplace union renewal.

### **Dimensions of the trade union 'crisis' in France and the SUD unions' response**

As with many other European countries, the most recent 'crisis' phase in French trade unionism began in the late 1970s with the most visible feature being the significant decline in membership levels. From the late 1970s French trade unions experienced the same challenges as other European trade union movements, such as high unemployment, more aggressive employers, a more liberalising State and changes in the labour force. These changes, as Chapter 1 outlines, have been important factors in the decline of trade union movements in France and across Europe. In the literature it is often argued that French trade unions are to a large extent, and (perhaps) to a greater extent than unions in other European countries, responsible for their own decline, with increasing union divisions since the 1990s and limited attempts to reverse the decline (in membership) and to develop strategies for union renewal (Amadiou, 1999; Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000; Daley, 1999). These factors have contributed to the 'crisis' analysis in French trade unionism. There is significant evidence for a crisis in French trade unionism if measured using

objective indicators such as membership data, strikes statistics, and the extent of trade union implantation in the private sector. Mouriaux (2005) argues that over the last century the French trade union movement has experienced a triple crisis – ideological, existential and strategic and that it is uncertain as to how and whether the unions can overcome these crises. Firstly, as discussed above, traditional union ideologies have become less relevant and trade unions are undergoing a reorientation of ideological visions, some defending existing traditions of unions as class actors, whilst others inclining towards unions as organisations for social integration. French trade unions are caught between class and society in the geometry of trade union identities (Hyman, 2001b). Secondly, the future role and the very survival of trade unions have been questioned in the context of a dramatic loss of membership, an increasing *institutionalisation* and *bureaucratisation* of trade unions, and a professionalization and increasingly distant engagement of activists. These factors have challenged the very *raison d'être* of French trade unions. Thirdly, trade unions have been disoriented strategically since the breakdown of the Fordist compromise, which formed the basis for collective action in the post-war period. The unions have been divided on strategies for overcoming the decline in trade unionism and this has further weakened and fragmented the movement. The extent of the decline in trade unionism in France has led some commentators to pose the question as to whether we are witnessing, at worst, ‘the end of trade unions’ (Labbé and Croiset, 1992), or at best, an evolution towards a new model of unions as ‘interest groups’ (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006). These analyses draw on evidence of the sustained low levels of union membership density in France and the evolution of trade union organisation and action, which have become increasingly bureaucratic, professionalised and state-dependent. Andolfatto and Labbé have recently argued that the strength of union



involvement in publicly funded institutions, which provides unions with vital resources, has increased the independence of unions from the workers they are supposed to represent. According to these authors trade unions thus increasingly resemble publicly funded interest groups. However, trade unions continue to play an important institutional role in employment relations, with their involvement in national, sectoral and company level collective bargaining, and in the management of social security systems. Trade union membership is under 10 per cent, but collective bargaining coverage is over 90 per cent. Outside these more general statement, there is a growing set of literature arguing that trade unions in France are in the process of transformation and evidence, which is often based on in-depth, qualitative research at the local level shows that unions continue to be relevant representative institutions for workers and they are undergoing a process of renewal (Contrepois, 2003; 2007; Dufour and Hege, 2002; Jefferys, 2003). This research challenges the crisis analysis and highlights local level success stories which demonstrate that the situation of trade unionism in France is complex, varied and uneven. This conclusion is not surprising given the highly decentralised nature of trade unionism in France.

What significance does the emergence of the SUD movement have in relation to the debates on trade union crisis and renewal? A number of critics have argued that the SUD movement reflects and compounds weaknesses in French trade unionism (Amadiou, 1999; Touraine, 1996: 289). On the one hand, the SUD unions have increased union divisions and reinforced a conflict-based approach in French industrial relations. However, the SUD unions have emerged proposing responses to the 'crisis' in French trade unionism. They argue that the crisis of unionism is reflected in the abandonment of conflict as a means for social transformation and an

institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of trade unions. The SUD unions have built their identity in opposition to that of the major confederations and set out to challenge the practices and ideas of the traditional trade union confederations. Their stated intentions are to build a 'mass unionism', revitalize collective action, and develop union democracy (Solidaires, 2007). In practice this involves implementing structures to listen to the rank-and-file, giving autonomy to local unions, alongside the rotation of responsibilities within the union. The SUD trade unions emerged with the aim to combat centralised and bureaucratic trade unionism and to revitalize a mass unionism close to the grassroots. In this section SUD's approach of developing a mass, non-bureaucratic model of unionism is located in what Caire (1992) identifies as a '*crisis of membership*', a '*crisis of influence*' and a '*crisis of activism*' in the French trade union movement. The *crisis of membership* and *influence* are evidenced from objective indicators, data on the decline in membership density and representative election participation. The incidence of strikes is also taken as an indicator of trade union influence, where the main tendency has been for a decline in participation. The *crisis of activism* is evidenced from more subjective, qualitative factors: union *institutionalisation* and *bureaucratisation* and the changing nature and role of activists.

In relation to the *crisis of membership*, trade union membership density has traditionally been low in France, peaking in the post-war period at 40 percent and falling to 20 percent during the 1970s (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000: 29). Trade union density has stabilised since the 1990s at around 8 percent (DARES, 2004), but remains the lowest density amongst industrialised countries. The overall membership density figures hide variations between sectors and between the



different union organisations. At least half of trade union members are to be found in the public sector, in protected nationalised industries (for example the railways and the post office) and public sector professions, where most workers have a public sector status. In these sectors trade union membership is estimated to be above 15 per cent. Over 70 percent of employment is in the private sector in France, but trade unions are weak in private companies with rates of between 5 and 8 per cent in the car industry, banks and insurance and rates of below 5 percent are to be found in business and retail, textiles and the building trade.

**Table 2.1 Trade union membership and workplace election support in 2005**

|                                | Membership numbers<br><i>(in thousands)</i><br>including retired<br>members | Membership numbers<br><i>(in thousands)</i> not<br>including retired<br>members | Workplace election<br>support (percentage) |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|
| CGT                            | 709   | 540   | 29,2                                       |
| CFDT                           | 818   | 470   | 23,0                                       |
| FO                             | 800   | 300   | 17,9                                       |
| CFTC                           | 132   | 100   | 7,7  |
| UNSA                           | 307   | 130   | 7,3  |
| CGC                            | 135   | 90  | 5,5  |
| FSU                            | 165   | 120   | 3,6  |
| Union syndicale-<br>Solidaires | 90  | 80  | 3,2  |
| Others                         | -   | 50  | 2,5  |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>3 156</b>  | <b>1 880</b>  | <b>100,0</b>                               |

Source: Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006

Table 2.1 shows the variation in membership levels amongst the different trade union confederations. The majority of trade union members are to be found in one of the five major nationally representative trade union confederations, the CGT, the CFDT; the CFTC; the CFE-CGC; and FO. All of the major confederations have experienced a decline in membership density, with the CGT being the worst affected, having lost nearly two thirds of its membership between 1975 and 1993. The CFDT has been an exception to this trend having regained members in the 1990s, with an average of 5 percent growth in members over the period 1989-2001 (Guillaume, 2004). This has been an outcome of an explicit strategy to increase union membership and the increase in the automatic withdrawal of membership fees, meaning a higher number of dues are paid per year by members (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006). The composition of members has changed dramatically since the 1970s, with a declining proportion of members in industry, particularly in the CGT and the CFDT, and an overrepresentation of members in the public and semi-public sector. As Table 2.1 shows over a million union members are retired and this has an important impact on membership density figures. Whilst they form 46 per cent of the working population, women are under-represented within the trade union movement, with estimates of a quarter and a third of union members being women. Pernot (2005: 310) argues that women are often hesitant to be actively involved in trade unionism, which is still influenced by the 'masculine model' of activism. Young workers are also under-represented, with around 6-7 per cent of members being under the age of 25 in the CGT (Ibid: 69). Added to this is the low rate of unionisation of ethnic minority, immigrant and second-generation immigrant workers (Goetschy, 1998: Jefferys, 2003), with workers holding two or more of these characteristics as even less likely to be unionised (Pernot, 2005). With the decentralised nature of trade



unionism, the collection of membership data has been the responsibility of local unions and federations. There have been difficulties of consolidating the membership data at the confederal level and unions have lacked information on the extent of the decline of their memberships and its composition. The simple lack of information has been an argument put forward for the delayed response of trade unions to the declines in membership density (Daley, 1999).

With a membership density of around 8 percent, union membership directly affects a minority of workers in France and with continued union divisions creating new unions there are an increasing number of trade unions sharing a small population of members (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2005). Indicators show a steep decline in membership density particularly for the traditionally dominant union organisation, the CGT, and comparatively, membership density is by far the lowest in Europe. Whilst there has been a stabilisation of membership and some signs of growth, trade unions have not been able to increase their membership significantly (Daley, 1999). However, with the highest overall density peaking at 40 percent trade unions in France have never been mass membership organisations. The unions increased their membership significantly in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, but they have generally been weak, except in a few sectors (Groux and Mouriaux, 1989). What are some of the reasons for this pattern in French trade union membership? There has been a tendency for French trade unions to rely on a core of trade union activists, rather than a mass of union members, and there are few advantages to becoming a trade union member in France. Firstly, collective agreements signed by the unions are extended to cover all workers and with the dual representation system, *délégués du personnels* (DP) represent workers' individual grievances and the

comités d'entreprise (CE) represent issues at the company level. The extent of trade union activists' involvement in official positions has meant that they are less present in the workplace to recruit members. Furthermore, representative status is guaranteed more from election results than from members and the focus for unions has been on elections rather than on recruiting members. These arguments go in some way to help understand the low membership levels in France. Research also points towards a tension in the relationship between activists and ordinary members. This tension manifests itself in relation to communicating the more technical aspects of the union's role in representative institutions. Activists were shown to have a collectivist attitude and valued communication with members, but there was frustration that union members did not share the ideological position of the activist/union (Batstone, 1978, Gallie, 1977; Smith, 1987). Union members are viewed as playing a passive role in the life of the union firstly, because of a lack of communication between activists and members, and secondly because of a disinterest in union affairs. This disinterest is considered in part a consequence of the political content of much of the activists' shop floor action. From this it could be argued that the activists helped construct and reconstruct patterns of low membership and disinterest in the union. The low membership density in France has been explained by the decline in employment in traditionally unionised sectors (for example, mining, steel and car manufacturing). Anti-union behaviour by employers has been another factor explaining the decline of membership, with around 15,000 union representatives made redundant each year. During the 1980s this explanation accounted for 5 percent of membership loss (Labbé and Croisat, 1992). The competitive and ideological nature of trade unions has also been an explanatory



factor for the low level of membership, as workers are put off by increasing divisions and the overtly political nature of the unions (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000)

A growing number of union members are to be found outside the major union confederations, in UNSA, FSU and Union syndicale – Solidaires. Most of the members of these unions are found in public services such as the railways, postal and telecommunications, energy, health, teaching and the tax office. The SUD trade unions have experienced important growth levels, both in relation to membership and support in workplace elections over a short time period. There are variations in geographical support, with the highest levels of membership in the Paris region. In 2004 SUD-Rail had an estimated total of 5000 members, which represents around 3 per cent of employees and around 10 percent of total members. The figure increased from 3000 to 4000 between 1998 and 2001, but the growth rate has stagnated with an estimate of 6500 members in 2006 (Sainsaulieu, 2006). SUD-PTT represents around 2 percent of workers in the postal and telecoms sector and 20 percent of total members. The union has progressed more quickly than other unions in the sector, and benefited from the conflicts of 1995, where a significant number of young workers joined SUD-PTT. In SUD-PTT around a half of members are ex-CFDT members, but the other half are newly unionised, which is a common pattern in SUD unions. Thus, the emergence of SUD has led to a new generation of union members and activists. However, the SUD unions are experiencing a problem of membership growth. Sainsaulieu argues that the SUD unions need allies to make their ambition of ‘mass unionism’ possible (1999b: 797). Whilst there is potential for membership growth in the SUD union, there is a similar pattern evolving of low membership. For the five legally representative trade unions in France, membership is not legally

required in order to set up a union section in the workplace. For the SUD unions, even though proof of representativeness is a requirement for recognition, the criterion of membership has not been held above other criteria, such as election support and union experience, for gaining representative status (Amadiou, 1999).

The second dimension of the trade union crisis, the *crisis of influence*, is manifest in declining levels of participation and support for unions in strike actions and in elections for representative bodies such as works councils (*comités d'entreprise*) and industrial tribunals (*prud'hommes*). With the decline of union members, representative elections have become an important way of measuring union legitimacy (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2005). Table 2.1 shows the electoral support for each of the trade union confederations. The CGT has maintained the greatest share of the vote, followed by the CFDT and FO. Nonetheless, the CGT has suffered the most serious decline in workplace election results. There was a rise in the number of non-union candidates standing in workplace elections from the 1970s and support increased for these candidates up until the early 1990s. During this period the unions had difficulties finding enough candidates to put forward for elections. This trend stabilised from the 1990s and in the 2001-2002 round of elections union organisations obtained 78 per cent of votes compared to 71 per cent ten years earlier (DARES, 2004). Nonetheless there has been an increase in the abstention rate for representative elections, particularly in the elections for industrial tribunals, from 36.9 percent in 1979 to 67.3 per cent in 2002. Workplace representative elections have fared better with a participation rate of around 2 out of every 3 workers, but the abstention rate has progressively increased. In the public sector there has been increasing support for UNSA and Union syndicales – Solidaires. However, Union



syndicales-Solidaires and the SUD unions influence remain limited outside the public sector. SUD-PTT and SUD-Rail are the second most supported unions in their respective sectors and Sainsaulieu (1999) argues that the unions have an electoral terrain for trade union renewal.

A defining feature of union influence within the French trade union movement has been the unions' significant mobilisation capacity in strikes and demonstrations. Strike actions or the threat of strike action has been the primary mechanism to influence policy. The declining influence of trade unions has been manifested in the decline in the number of strikes and demonstrations and the decline in strike participation. In France, trade unions are the principle organisers of demonstrations and comprise the majority of participants. The demonstration is considered to be important for expressing grievances and signifying membership of a collective identity. The CGT organises the most demonstrations in France, often in competition with SUD and FSU who, like the CGT, value collective mobilisation, or at least its ritualised expression (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006). After the failure of the strikes against pension reforms in 2003, trade unions have placed less emphasis on organising mass demonstrations, perhaps reflecting an awareness of a decline in mobilisation capacity. In France the pattern of industrial relations has traditionally been based on the sequence of strike-demands-negotiation, where conflict often precedes union demands and the eventual opening of negotiations (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006). In France, strike rates have fallen dramatically since the 1970s (Lallement, 2001; Rosanvallon, 1988). From 1977 the 'solidarity' or multi-employer strike declined rapidly and single-employer strikes reached the lowest level since the Liberation in 1944 in the first half of the 1990s. This decline has been interrupted by

important strike action in the private sector in 1982 and 1999-2000 over the reduction of working time and in the public sector in 1995 over the 'Juppé plan' and in 2003 over pension reforms. Conflict has become a largely public sector phenomenon, where there have been persistently above average levels of strike action. In 2003 the number of working days lost to strike action declined to its lowest ever level in the private sector.

Jefferys (2003) claims that since 1995 there has been an increase in strike participation and a greater readiness to exercise the right to strike. Nevertheless, strikes have become more defensive in nature, aimed at defending sectional interests rather than pushing for reform in the context of a national class struggle. Union divisions have made industrial conflict a less viable tool and even though mobilising capacity still exists, it has been increasingly difficult for unions to influence policy. The unions have had recent high profile conflicts and the unions' capacity for mobilising workers still far outweighs their membership levels. Strike levels in France are no higher than the European average, but they tend to be more visible because they are concentrated in the public sector and transport (Parsons, 2005). Andolfatto and Labbé (2006) argue that the mediatisation of public sector strikes has helped to hide the general tendency of a decline in strike actions. The SUD trade unions have built their identity around group conflict as a reaction to what they perceive to be a decline in the use of the strike weapon amongst the other union confederations. The SUD unions have been successful in mobilising workers, mainly in the public sector, and have gained media attention for their confrontational approach and often hard line stance in conflicts. The emergence of the SUD



movement has not changed the generally tendency towards a decline in the incidence of and participation in strike actions.

The third dimension of the trade union crisis, the *crisis of activism*, is evident in the themes in the literature of an increasing *institutionalisation* and *bureaucratisation* of trade unions and the professionalization and distancing of activists from the workers they are supposed to represent (Adam, 1983; Andolfatto and Labbé, 2006; Ion, 1997; Labbé, 1992; 2000; Rosanvallon, 1988). These issues are dealt with consecutively in the remainder of this section. Debates on the ‘institutionalisation’ of French trade unions have been significant in the French literature, with institutionalisation tending to signify the growing reliance on the legal, financial and organisational resources obtained by trade unions (Adam, 1983; Closet, 1985; Labbé, 1994; Rosanvallon, 1988). The trade unions are accused of becoming increasingly integrated into the system that they ostensibly oppose and investment in the institutional sphere has discouraged union renewal (Daley, 1999). The institutionalisation of trade unionism in France is to a large extent attributed to government interventions seeking to strengthen the traditionally weak trade unions. Representative status was awarded to the five major trade unions by in 1966 and this continues to guarantee them access to workplaces without having to prove representative status. This status has meant that unions have not had to focus attention on building membership numbers to gain recognition or increased bargaining power. Interventions by the French State in 1968 and 1982 provide important markers for the ‘institutionalisation’ of French unions. Legal backing was giving to local union organisation in 1968. Before 1968, trade unions historically had a marginal legal and institutional position at the local level, having no rights to organise and collect dues in the workplace (Smith, 1987). The

unions' position at the workplace level was consolidated in 1982, with the Auroux laws, by reinforcing the rights of representative institutions, allowing workers the direct and collective right of expression, requiring annual negotiations with management at the company level, and the creation of a health and safety committee. The first law obliged employers to negotiate wages with union representatives on an annual basis although they were not required to reach an agreement. This law also permitted firm level agreements which down graded agreements made at the sectoral or national levels. The second law strengthened the role of works councils at the expense of trade union organisations. Labbé and Courtois, (2001) argue that since the Auroux laws in 1982 there has been an increase in the number of official positions for trade union activists, who spend much of their time involved in managing the union, managing welfare systems or working for elected positions within the enterprise. This legislation has been introduced by sympathetic governments to help strengthen the union movement. The paradox of the legal interventions to strengthen local level trade unionism, in that this reinforcement of workplace unionism has occurred at a time when the pool of activists to fill the growing number of representative positions has been declining along with membership. This has meant that activists have been more likely to take on more than one representative role and become 'quasi-permanent officials' (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). Labbé (2000) has argued that trade union activists have become bureaucrats, distant from the rank-and-file, with the only mechanism that linking union activists to the base is their need for a new mandate in workplace elections. Thus analyses suggest that new legal rights have paradoxically led to a progressive distancing from the workforce and a further weakening of trade unions.



Andolfatto and Labbé (2000) have illustrated the growing 'institutionalisation' of trade unions by categorising the different levels of involvement within French trade unions. Firstly, permanent officials occupy full-time positions in the union, in the workplace or in welfare organisations. Outside this inner circle a larger group of activists spend the majority of their time on union activities, in the workplace or in the union. The third group of workplace representatives is the largest. They are the holders of representative positions and through these positions they have resources, in terms of hours, to carry out their duties. This group often has a 'plurality' ('cumul') of positions, which include being union representatives (délégués syndicaux), workplace representatives (délégués du personnel), works council representatives (membres de comités d'entreprise) and health and safety representatives (délégués de CHCST). The links between these representatives and the union centre are often distant (2000: 75). The fourth level is made-up of former representatives or activists, a large proportion being retired members. The final section is made up of ordinary union members. It is difficult to get hold of figures on the total numbers within each level, but the authors argue that the numbers of activists comprising the first two levels have increased to form a group of trade union professionals, while the representatives active in the workplace and the number of members have declined. This has led some to argue that trade unionism in France has returned to its origins of a unionism of activists or a '*syndicalisme de militants*' (Lallement, 1996).

The 'bureaucratisation' of trade unions has been an important theme in the wider trade union literature since Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy'. From the French literature it is difficult to analyse and make conclusions on the extent to which trade

unions act democratically as the internal practices of democracy in French trade unions have not been the subject of detailed research. Groux and Mouriaux (1992: 65) have argued that little is known about the organisation and internal functioning of the CGT and in trade unions more generally. Therefore the lack of understanding of this aspect of French trade unionism presents an important area for further research. French trade unions appear to epitomise a form of representative democracy in contrast to participative democracy. This interpretation is based on the fact that union membership is low and the observation that there is a distant engagement of unions in the workplace due to the high level of involvement in workplace and other representative institutions. Therefore, the main link between the union and workers is through workplace representative institutions, rather than through a direct relationship between workers/members and activists. It has been argued that from 1968 the local union, which comprises one or more workplace union sections, has been the most important level of organisation in French trade unionism (Parsons, 2005). The legalisation of local unions and subsequently the decentralisation of collective bargaining in 1982 have given local unions a far greater legal base upon which to exercise their autonomy (Ibid). The local union maintains a high degree of independence from the confederation level and central control over local union has traditionally been weak (Daley, 1999; Parsons, 2005). Smith (1987) argues that the confederations' ideology provides at most only a general guide to action, not a detailed plan and that the immediate context, especially at plant level, affects the strategic choices open to local unions. Enterprise or workplace level trade unions (*syndicats*) form the basis of trade union organisation and each union is integrated into their chosen confederation both vertically and horizontally. Trade unions are organised by sector of activity into 'federations' (vertical structure) and by



geographical location into inter-professional regional unions (horizontal structure). This structure was originally characteristic of the CGT, but has been adopted by the major trade union confederations to become the dominant model of confederal unionism in France (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2000). The SUD trade unions have criticised the bureaucratic nature of existing confederations and are based on a federal structure which aims to cut out an organisational layer.

Andolfatto and Labbé (2000) argue that, with the lack of general assemblies and trade union activity involving members at the local level, French trade unions can no longer be considered as democratic organisations. The authors go further to suggest that the vitality and maintenance of local union organisation depends to a large extent on the mandates from representative institutions (Ibid). In a number of workplaces the focus of union activity is on institutional tasks rather than the traditional trade union activities of collecting membership dues, distributing union press, and managing the local union. These authors also argue that at all levels the elections of union leaderships tend to be non-competitive and co-opted. There is a lack of internal debate and leaderships tend to make important decisions unanimously. They argue that this creates the risk of internal conflict and the formation of *coordinations* and breakaway movements. It can be argued that the formation of local level coordinations and the creation of new movements such as SUD, with the specific aim to develop democracy, have been signs of the lack of democracy within French trade union confederations.

The third feature of the *crisis of activism* is reflected in the professionalization and increasingly distant engagement of activists. Caire (1992) argues that the *crisis of*

*activism* can be understood to some extent as nostalgia for the practices of direct action that marked the culture of trade unionism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Alongside the decline of trade membership during the 1980s was a consequent decline in number of union activists. The strengthening of the trade unions' institutional role as described above has inevitably led to a shift in the activities of union activists. Mothé (1973) distinguishes three broad types of French activists. The first is primarily oriented towards the workers he or she represents and seeks to mobilise them. The second is primarily oriented towards other activists and is above all a defender and promoter of a particular ideology. The third type of activists plays the role of technician using his or her skills to negotiate and is oriented more towards the established structure of power. Caire (1980) offers a typology of militants that is similar to that of Mothé: 'le militant ouvrier'; 'le militant cadre'; and 'le militant technician'. The defining characteristics of these types map onto the three orientations of Mothé's activists in respective order. The literature suggests that there has been a decline in the first two types of trade union activist and an increase in the third type. With a distancing from the workplace level from their institutionalisation, union activists are no longer concerned with the workers they represent. Also, with the decline in importance of ideology within the union movement, activists are no longer concerned with defending a specific ideological position. Jacques Ion (1997) argues that the engagement of activists has become increasingly 'distant' and 'punctuated'. Ion relates this trend to social and cultural change, where an increase in individualism has meant prioritising personal fulfilment and devaluing collective engagements. Trade unions and political parties have been victims of this change and engagement tends to be relatively disinterested and only for short-term causes. The traditional image of the engaged, politically motivated



French activist has evolved and trade union activists have become more professionalised with an increased need for activists to develop specialist skills in the context of their greater role in official institutions. Recent research confirms a move towards a greater 'professionalization' of union activists, the term employed to describe the shift towards representatives having greater levels of specialist expertise (Guillaume and Mouret, 2004). This research has mainly concerned works council representatives, and highlights that there has been a specialisation of roles and development of specialist skills as an outcome of the increasing importance of workplace representative institutions. This trend can be linked to the Auroux laws of 1982, which provided for the obligation for workplace collective bargaining and for a works council role in the economic direction of the company, with the right to consult experts. In addition, the decentralisation of bargaining and improved rights for unions in the workplace have led to a greater need for local activists to be aware and have knowledge of the rights pertaining to them and the possibilities for organisation and action in the workplace. Guillaume and Mouret (2004) suggest that engagement of union activists in workplace institutions has allowed activists to gain specialist skills and certain activists consider involvement in representative positions as a way of developing qualifications and as a possible career option. Rather than meaning a distancing from the workplace, this research argues that there were considerable efforts on the part of representatives to maintain links with the workplace. However, trade union representatives experienced difficulties in communicating technical issues to workplace constituents. Yet, in spite of the difficulties of relations with the workplace, representatives considered these links to be an important part of their activity.

Recent empirical studies have shown a continued vitality of activism observed at the local level which contradicts and challenges dominant analyses towards institutionalisation and bureaucratisation in French trade unionism (Boudesseul, 1996; Contrepois, 2003; Dufour and Hege, 2002). Based on ethnographic research of trade unionism in an industrial region outside Paris, Contrepois (2003; 2004) criticises the institutionalisation thesis, arguing that such problems have been debates and tensions in the union movement from its very origins and that trade unionism remains anchored in an approach that starts with spontaneous opposition to social injustice. She argues that unions remain open institutions to those they represent and to those who want to become involved in the organisation. Whilst her research shows that unions invested more in workplace institutions and in economic and technical expertise, they were also concerned with maintaining an independence from employers and the state, and with using workplace institutions to adopt union concerns. Her research also shows that ideological influences and competitive unionism were of less importance in the daily activities of the local level unions than some analyses would suggest.

Boudesseul (1996) also highlights continuity in the nature of trade union action, tracing the practices and strategies of local CFDT union. He argues that the union was able to develop a model of local unionism, which was based on a strategy of continuous direct action. The author suggests that this strategy was more about developing a practice which maintained union independence in the face of institutionalisation, than about putting forward a particular ideology. There are two conclusions to be drawn from this research. Firstly, and contrary to evidence of the CFDT's reformism at the confederal level, CFDT unions at the local level have



developed strategies that maintain a conflict-based form of unionism. Secondly, the evidence demonstrates that in certain contexts trade unions are able to develop strategies that seek to demonstrate their independence as a trade union from institutional representation. The work of Dufour and Hege (2002) also problematises the union institutionalisation thesis. In their empirical study of representation systems in Europe, the authors argue that French activists place importance on increasing their legitimacy amongst their constituents and go beyond their recognised institutional role. They seek to create the right conditions for effective mobilisation using the tools made available to them by their institutional position. They also argue the importance of looking at the 'local social group' ('groupe social local') for understanding patterns of representation. The local social group was not necessarily representative of the existing composition of workers in any given workplace, but represented the 'group identity' that activists sought to defend. The quality of the link between union representatives and their constituents was seen as an essential element in building the 'rapport de force' which gave representatives the support they needed to influence local workplace relations and reinforce the identity of the local social group (2002:192). The authors argue that activists were not able to rely solely on legal rights, electoral legitimacy or institutional dialogue with employers, and that daily representation was an essential element of maintaining local group identity within the 'micro-community' (2002:201). This challenges the assumption that unions have become entirely distanced from the workplace and that activists place little emphasis on representing workers. However, the need to link the specific interests of the work group to wider issues was considered an essential activity for union leaders. This highlights the tension of the union activists' role as being one to foster a wider sense of collectivism amongst the work group. This tension between

representing workers' expressed interests and the interests perceived to be of importance by local level activists has been observed in earlier studies on activism in France (Batstone, 1978; Gallie, 1977; Smith, 1987).

Rather than a *crisis of activism*, therefore, some authors have argued that there has been a crisis of a certain model of militancy and an evolution of the role and engagement of militants (Contrepois, 2003). Contrepois argues that the reasons for worker engagement in unions have not changed in substance, with motivations including the defence of workers' rights, the desire to be part of a group, and putting forward an alternative vision of the world against the one imposed by powerful elites (2003: 180). She also argues that the process of taking responsibility in the union has remained much the same, with the training of militants based on a form of apprenticeship, where experienced activists transfer knowledge and values to new recruits. On the other hand, her study does highlight that trade union activists, particularly young activists in technical or management positions, tend increasingly to separate their occupational activity from their duties as an activist, which highlights the pressures towards a more distant engagement of union activists. Nonetheless, these research studies present more positive accounts of the health and strength of trade unionism in France from the perspective of the grassroots.

Whatever the extent of the crisis in French trade unionism, the SUD unions have offered responses to the institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of French trade unionism. In response to growing institutionalisation, the SUD unions have based their identity on a non-institutionalised form of unionism. The SUD unions argue that in order for workers to become members of the union, they first need to see the



utility of representatives and be able to identify with them. This requires that trade union representatives are accessible and not taken up with activities from representative institutions (Solidaires, 2007). However, Damesin and Denis (2001: 2005) argue that there are three factors motivating the SUD unions to strengthen their institutional status and to integrate into the representative system. Firstly, there are important financial issues at stake: scores gained at workplace representative elections allocate resources to the unions, with the percentage of the votes gained representing a number of hours for union and workplace representative activities. On being declared representative, unions are able to stabilise their structures through the allocation of hours for representative duties, the release of activists for full-time activities, and a budget. Secondly, unions declared representative at a national level can take part in negotiations and have the right to ask to meet with management. SUD trade unions are considered nationally representative within their respective sectors, but this does not give them access to the inter-professional level. Whilst the SUD unions reject the confederalism practiced by the other union confederations, they have nonetheless become increasingly implicated in Union Syndicale – Solidaires to avoid isolation at the inter-professional level. Thirdly, union representative status allows access to a legitimate position in the industrial relations system in order to defend the status of employees (Damesin, 2001). The system of industrial relations in the public sector in France ‘pushes the SUD trade union federations to adhere to the system in order to be able to contest it, and possibly to contribute to changing it. The declaration of representativeness, necessary for the obtainment of operating means, brings about the institutionalisation of trade unions, and simultaneously brings about their capacity to legitimately criticise the institutionalisation of trade unionism’ (Damesin and Denis, 2005:23). The SUD

union face a dilemma in trying to react against an institutionalised model of unionism, whilst being required to integrate within the industrial relations system in order to act and influence the system. The nature of SUD unionism is contradictory, being at the same time inside the industrial relations system and outside the type of unionism normally practised in public sector organisations. In order to avoid an institutionalised form of unionism, the SUD unions have rules on the permitted lengths of mandates and number of positions held by activists. However, in the context of a limited number of activists to fill these positions, the consequence is that the SUD unions have not had replacements when activists give up posts (Ibid). This has led to the ‘cumul’ of posts and an inevitable distancing from its rank-and-file, due to preoccupations with the activities of a number of roles. This contradicts with SUD’s ideal of developing a model of unionism close to the rank and file. This reflects permanent tension in SUD’s approach, between the idealism of grassroots unionism and the reality of maintaining union organisation.

The SUD trade unions’ focus on developing union democracy has inspired ethnographic research on the subject (Pernot, 2003). In Pernot’s (2003) study of the project to develop ‘democracy’ in a local union of SUD-PTT, the author compares the intentions of the SUD-PTT activists with the practices of democracy. SUD-PTT activists’ intention was to develop direct democracy, which was valued as more democratic than other forms, such as representative democracy. The project of democracy assumed the active participation of members and workers in union activity. However, she observes that there were gaps between the activists’ intentions and practices. The gaps were evident in the levels of interventions in union decision-making structures, where leader activists dominated. There was also



a lack of influence from those outside the union hierarchy in shaping issues for discussion and in the orientations of debates. She also observes that the activists concerned in the discussions did not take these inequalities into account. There were variations in the levels of participation of activists, and, with low level of participation in local general assemblies, activists questioned the principle of decision making through general assemblies. This research highlights the difficulties in SUD-PTT's project of constructing participative democracy, which reflects the tension between 'efficiency' and 'democracy', where the 'unions' capacity to act effectively on behalf of their members is inhibited if membership participation in policy-making is direct and organic, and facilitated if democratic procedures are purely formal and indirect' (Hyman, 1994: 122-123). This suggests that whilst the SUD unions have set out with the intentions to overcome the anti-democratic methods of the existing trade union confederations, they are experiencing familiar problems in constructing and sustaining a form of participative democracy.

In response to the professionalization and more distant engagement of activists, the SUD unions have the intention to revitalize direct action and traditional trade union militancy. The generation of militants at the origins of the SUD unions are aged from 36-45, and have been influenced by the values of 'autogestion' and collective action which were prevalent at the time of their entrance in the labour market in the aftermath of May 1968. The unions profit from the dynamism of young politically experienced leaders who head up a lean and relatively non-bureaucratic structure (Sainseulieu, 1999). Traces of anarcho-syndicalism have been observed in the movement, with militants 'persuaded of the necessity of individual action and of the individual, trained and educated' (Chamberland, 1999 cited in Sainsaulieu: 2006:

707). This has implications for the nature of militancy in the SUD unions where leaders, inspired by anarcho-syndicalism, take on a central role in the processes of mobilisation. The SUD unions have not escaped the processes of professionalization and institutionalisation. The SUD unions have developed a practice of taking legal action as a way of forwarding union organisation. This marks out the peculiarity of SUD unions, as they base their identity on a combative form of unionism rather than one favourable towards institutionalised regulation (Denis, 2003:308). Acting outside the protection awarded to the major confederations, it has been essential for SUD activists to have expert knowledge of labour legislation. The major trade union confederations, particularly the CGT and the CFDT, and managements attempted to block the SUD unions from presenting candidates in workplace representative elections. Legal processes ensued for gaining union representative status enhancing a general awareness of appropriate union legislation. The development of legal expertise has thus been a matter of survival for the SUD trade unions and reflects the SUD union approach of ‘pragmatic militancy’, where the activists are prepared to use the system in order to forward their organisation. It is also a reflection of the ‘conflict of rules’ approach which is associated with the SUD unions. This is based on Groux’s analyses of social conflict (1998) where he argues that there has been a widening of collective action which increasingly includes unions engaged in trying to modify the ‘rules of the game’ of industrial relations (Reynaud, 1993).

From this discussion, what conclusions can be made on the nature and extent of the trade union crisis in France? The evidence demonstrates that the experience is uneven and varied and more complex than certain analyses would suggest. In spite of their overall weaknesses, trade unions appear to have survived the ‘crisis’ and



predictions of terminal decline, and they continue to evolve and play a role in employment relations (Contrepois, 2003). Historical analyses suggest that French trade unions have never been in a 'natural' crisis-free period (Groux and Mouriaux, 1992) and the use of the term 'crisis' to characterise French trade unionism has abated since the turn of the century, with French commentators arguing for a shift towards looking at the internal dynamics of union action and their representative capacity (Contrepois, 2003; Dufour and Hege, 2002; Pernot, 2005). In spite of their outward lack of legitimacy, trade unions continue to occupy an important place in the economic, social and political fabric of France (Boulin 2000:216). There has been a tailing off of the decline in union membership since the 1990s and research shows that the proportion of workplaces covered by a union representative has increased (DARES, 2004). The continued importance of trade unions is reflected in the question posed by outsiders as to how such a weak and divided trade union movement can mobilise so many individuals to act against social and political reforms (Pernot, 2005).

The SUD trade unions have offered responses to the apparent crisis in French trade unionism. In the choice between reformism and revolution the unions have chosen the latter, with an emphasis on radicalism. SUD have developed a social movement unionism, with links and engagement in movements for the unemployed and anti-globalisation. In organisational terms the SUD unions have rejected a centralised and bureaucratic confederalised unionism, and opted for a decentralised, democratic form of unionism. The union's main strategy has been confrontation and conflict, which is in opposition to the dominant trend towards compromise bargaining. However, from this discussion it can be argued that the SUD unions have not been

able to escape certain features of the model of unionism that they aim to confront. The unions have shown potential in terms of membership growth and election results but they have been unable to develop their influence outside the public sector and a limited number of large private companies. Furthermore, the development of 'mass unionism' remains extremely unlikely whilst acting in isolation of other union confederations. The unions have made conscious efforts to avoid institutionalisation and bureaucratisation, but experience problems because of the number of activists required to fill representative positions, thus distancing the activists from the workplace. Research has also shown that there are tensions in participative democracy as leaders tend to dominate the unions' functioning, which reflects anarcho-syndicalist influences which discourages democracy in favour of the actions of individual leaders (Pernot, 2003; Sainseulieu, 2006). There are coercive pressures towards the development of an institutionalised form of trade unionism which reflects a tendency towards 'institutional isomorphism' in organisational fields (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). For example, the legal system, which provides unions with essential resources in the context of low membership, has acted as a coercive pressure towards the institutionalisation of the SUD unions. This creates the risk of the SUD unions taking on similarly structures and practices as exiting unions in spite of their attempts to avoid institutional isomorphism. The tensions experienced within the SUD unions can be seen as reflecting the universal and perennial conflict between 'movement' and 'organisation' observed within any form of worker collectivism (Hyman, 2001b). A trade union is at one and the same time 'a business like service organisation, operating a variety of agencies under a complicated system of industrial relations' and 'an expression and vehicle of the historical movement of the submerged laboring masses for social recognition and



democratic self-determination' (Herberg, 1968 cited in Hyman, 2001b: 60-61). The argument is that over time the former has come to dominate over the latter. From this discussion it is evident that the SUD unions are caught between embodying a movement for the mobilisation of workers and the need to build and sustain organisation in a complex system of industrial relations. This thesis is concerned with the ways in which the SUD unions manage this contradiction at the local level.

### **Summary and research questions**

This chapter has considered the broader historical and contemporary context of the SUD union movement. From a review of the literature there appears to have been a partial renewal in trade unionism with the emergence of SUD. The SUD unions have encouraged a new generation of members and activists into unionism, and revitalized union militancy based practices of direct action. Tensions are appearing in the SUD movement's approach. Firstly, there has been a tension between the unions' representation of the dominant work groups from public sector organisations and the construction of an identity that aims to defend wider working class interests. Secondly, there have been problems in constructing a form of participative unionism where evidence, albeit limited, has shown that there was a dominance of leader activists in the governance and direction of the union. A third limitation has been in their aim to construct a unionism based on a high turnover of activists in representative positions, at a time when there appear to be fewer activists to fill positions. Finally, it has been observed that the SUD union are in a contradictory position with their non-cooperative approach, as the unions have had to integrate into the institutional mould of workplace representation in order to develop their radical,

confrontational approach. This risks a distancing of the SUD unions from the workplace which may consequentially lead to the development of a more responsible, institutionalised form of unionism. There is thus evidence to suggest that the SUD trade unions are following existing patterns in French trade unionism.

However, the stated intentions of the SUD unions reflect elements considered important for union renewal and revitalization identified in Chapter 1. Firstly, Fairbrother (2000) argues that for union renewal there needs to be a renewed workplace engagement and a concern with building union democracy. These are concerns taken up by the SUD movement in the context of what they perceive to be a distancing from the workplace and a bureaucratisation of unionism in the traditional confederations. Secondly, Frege and Kelly (2004) argue that to reverse the decline unions need to broaden their perspectives beyond the workplace and to develop revitalization strategies focused on organising, reform of union structures, political action, labour-management partnership, coalition-building, and international solidarity. The SUD unions can be associated with developing a mixture of these strategies with varying degrees of success. This chapter identifies several gaps in the literature on the practices and strategies of building and sustaining processes of union renewal in the SUD movement, particularly relating to SUD-Rail. To what extent have SUD developed revitalization strategies and in what ways have they been successful? What are the obstacles to sustaining the SUD movement's approach? In relation to the SUD unions' practice of developing union democracy, how is this constructed and sustained? Kelly (1998) argues that to achieve workplace engagement requires leadership skills in constructing a sense of collective identity among an increasingly diversified workforce and one that is no longer attached to the



collectivist ideologies of the past. How are activists in the SUD unions able to build a sense of collective identity amongst workers? This chapter has demonstrated the importance of examining SUD-Rail at the conjuncture of increasing pressures to reform the sector. How is the union dealing with the tensions within its approach in relation to its union identity, its organisation and strategy? From this discussion the following questions are posed for exploration in this research:

*To what extent and how is the union SUD-Rail able to build and sustain a form of participative union democracy and to avoid an institutionalised and bureaucratic form of unionism?*

*To what extent and how is SUD-Rail able to build a 'mass unionism' in the context of the internal and external constraints to recruiting members?*

*To what extent and how has SUD-Rail been able to maintain close links to the workplace?*

*To what extent and how does SUD-Rail construct and sustain collective interests and identity in the context of competitive unionism and decline in relevance of traditional trade union ideologies?*

Data following from these questions allows for an engagement with broader debates on the nature and extent of trade union renewal in France and in a comparative perspective.

*What do the ideas and practices of SUD-Rail tell us about the extent and nature of union renewal in France?*

*What broader lessons can be drawn on the nature of and prospects for union renewal and revitalization?*

This chapter has demonstrated that research conducted at the local level has shown that unions, in spite of their perceived weaknesses, continue to be important representative institutions in the workplace. Trade union research by French academics has tended to concentrate on the macro level determinants of union behaviour and studies on the prospects for trade unionism focus on exogenous factors acting as threats to trade unions rather than the ‘internal springs’ for union action (Hege, 1997). Recent empirical studies present more optimistic accounts of the state of trade unionism in France compared with the dominant ‘crisis’ analyses. This in part derives from a shift in the focus of the study from the national to the local level and uses different qualitative and quantitative measures for estimating the state of unions’ strength.

There are several arguments which indicate the growing importance of the workplace level as the level for assessing trade union renewal in France. There has been a decentralisation of collective bargaining and a strengthening of workplace representative institutions. The appearance of local level ‘coordinations’ and the emergence of SUD unions can be viewed as symptomatic of a lack of democracy in the union movement and of the conscious efforts of local level unions to organise



and mobilise workers interests. The SUD unions have developed an approach of ‘pragmatic militancy’ where the principal focus is the workplace level. This suggests that the most appropriate level at which to examine the nature and extent of union renewal is at the workplace level. The ways in which union activists in SUD-Rail have developed their approach and organisation have not been the subject of detailed research. This thesis is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature to present a dynamic picture of unionism at the local level in SUD-Rail. The following chapter presents the methodological approach employed to address the research questions.

## Chapter 3: Researching unionism in France

### Introduction

This thesis develops an ethnographic *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) of the social processes of unionism in SUD-Rail. The first part of the chapter explores in more detail the ways in which the framing approach (Snow et al, 1986) can be used to present and analyse the processes towards developing and sustaining union renewal. This research seeks to understand the ways in which the union SUD-Rail sustains processes of union renewal in light of the constraints identified in Chapter 2, for example, the coercive pressures towards institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. This chapter argues that the framing processes approach is able to capture the ways in which activists go about developing and sustaining a sense of collectivism. In the second part of this chapter I outline the reasons underlying the choice of *ethnography* and *thick description*. In order to understand the dynamics of framing it is necessary to employ an ethnographic approach as any other method will not be able to capture the object of inquiry. The framing approach is particularly suited to a form of thick description which seeks to apply theories and concepts to ethnographic research. The principal method for the research was participant observation and the final part of the chapter is dedicated to a reflexive account of the research process, which highlights methodological issues surrounding ethnography and participant observation. In the social sciences decisions on how research is to be conducted are inherently complex and, inevitably reflect the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the



researcher. Researcher reflexivity is an important part of the research process as it recognises that a social researcher is not a neutral observer but rather studies a social world to which he or she also belongs.

### **Applying framing to trade union research**

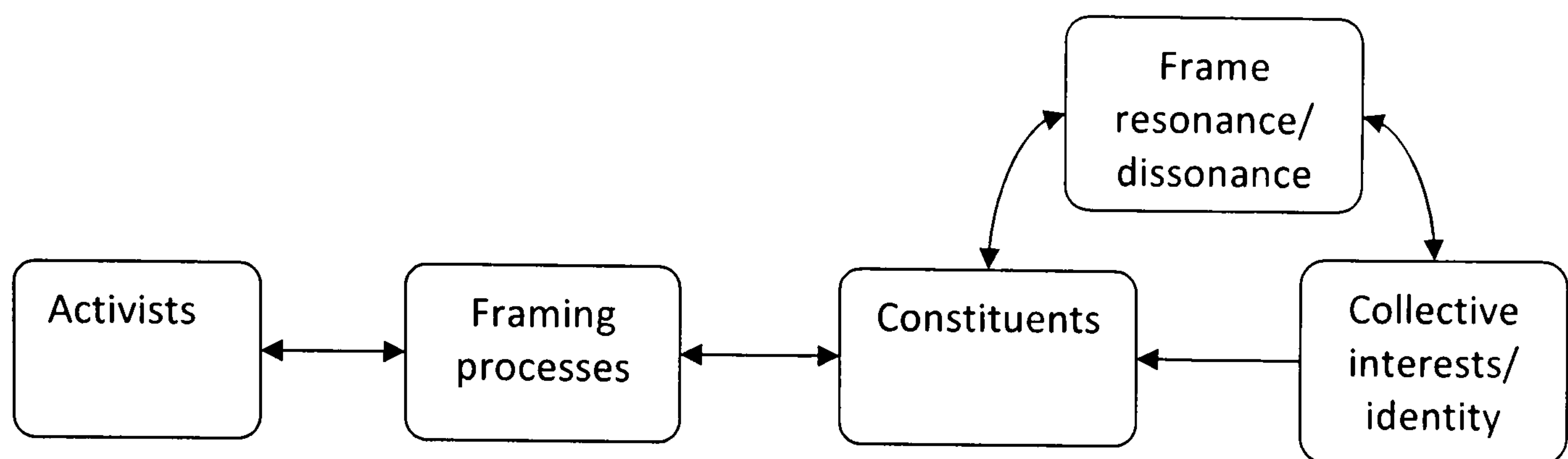
This thesis is concerned with understanding the social processes of constructing and sustaining union renewal at the local level. In the previous chapters it was argued that the SUD trade unions have experienced tensions within their approach and there is evidence to suggest that the unions are repeating certain existing patterns in French trade unionism. The challenge for this research is to explore how the subjectivity, choices and actions of actors mediate and influence these observable outcomes. In Chapter 1 the importance of the role of leaders in the process of collectivisation was considered. It was argued that leaders use collective action frames to encourage, support and legitimise union action. This section considers the framing concept in more detail and how it can be applied in a study of French unionism.

The concept of ‘framing’ is used to explore the ideational arguments and symbols that movement actors’ draw on to frame collective interests. The framing perspective borrows and adapts the concept ‘frame’ from Erving Goffman’s 1974 work on the organisation of experience. For Goffman frames denote ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large (Goffman, 1974: 21). In social movement theory Snow and Benford (1988) adopt this idea and argue that frames ‘help to render events meaningful and thereby function to organise experience

and guide action'. Developing this idea in the context of social movements *collective action frames* are defined as 'action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimise the activities and campaigns of a social movement organisation' (Benford and Snow, 2000a). Collective action frames perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the 'world out there' but in ways intended to mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilise antagonists' (Snow and Benford, 1988: 198). To illustrate, a pervasive collective action frame, mainly for inspiring and legitimising social movements advocating some form of political and or economic change, has been the 'injustice frame' (Gamson, 1992). This collective action frame aims to 'underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable' (Snow and Benford, 1992:137). Kelly (1998) argues that collective action frames centring on 'injustice' or 'illegitimacy' are an essential part of understanding collective organisation and action within trade unions. Whilst not all collective action frames include an 'injustice' component, as collective organisations can base their action on religion, gender, or ethnicity, it is argued that an important part of legitimising and mobilising collective action for trade unions is the injustice component. Ideologies can assist in 'framing' an issue, event or situation and constitute cultural resources that can be tapped and exploited for the purpose of constructing collective action frames. The framing perspective thus assumes the socially constructed and contingent nature of a movement's identity and 'ideology'. The notion of framing is similar to that of 'systems of argument' developed by Batstone (1978), but builds on this approach by providing a more dynamic set of concepts with which to analyse the construction of collective interests.



**Figure 3.1 An interactional model of framing processes**



The model presented in Figure 3.1 can be used as a heuristic device to set out the potential links between union activists and the construction of collective interests and identity. The framework develops the discussion from Chapter 1 which argues that the interaction between union leaders and workers is important for building and sustaining collective interest definition and identity. The framework does not represent a prejudgment of the processes of collective interest definition and identity but can be used as a resource to make sense of the processes being observed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:210). The model helps to visualise the processes of collective interest definition and identity as dynamic and ongoing. The remainder of this section discusses the components of the model.

The main assumption of the framing processes approach is that social movement actors are ‘signifying agents, actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers’ (Benford and Snow, 2000a: 613). Snow et al (1986) identity specific ‘framing alignment

processes' carried out by movement activists. These processes attempt to 'align' the constituent with the movement in order to encourage some level of support. One of the processes by which activists attempt to do this is in their highlighting of certain values or beliefs, which may have some salience with their constituents. This process is termed 'frame amplification'. The process of 'frame amplification' involves the 'idealisation, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 624). This framing process can take two forms, 'value amplification' and 'belief amplification'. Firstly, values are construed as 'modes of conduct or states of existence that are thought worthy of protection and promotion' (1986: 469). These values, referring to the goals or end states which movements seek to attain or promote, such as justice or democracy, are idealised and amplified as a 'springboard' for mobilising support. Secondly, in relation to belief amplification, beliefs can be construed as 'ideational elements that cognitively support or impede action in pursuit of desired values' (1986: 469-470). Snow et al identify five kinds of beliefs: the previously discussed beliefs about the seriousness of a problem, issue or grievance in question; beliefs about the locus of causality or blame; stereotypic beliefs about antagonists or targets of influence; beliefs about the probability of change or the efficacy of collective action; and belief about the necessity and propriety of 'standing up' (1986: 470).

The framing perspective also presents the possibility to explore the reasons for a presence or absence of support and participation in unionism. Snow et al argue that 'frame alignment of one form or another, is a necessary condition for movement participation, whatever its nature and intensity' (1986: 467). There are two sets of factors that may influence the success or failure of framing processes. Firstly the



success of a 'frame' depends on the degree of 'resonance' it has with the constituent. The term 'frame resonance' is used to define the potential for success of a 'collective action frame' (Snow et al, 1986; Hunt et al, 1994). That is, the degree to which the content or substance of the collective action frame resonates with the current life situation and the experience of the constituents (1986: 477). A second set of factors affecting the relative success or failure of framing efforts concerns the 'hazards' or 'vulnerabilities' confronting movements in the processes of framing. The framing of certain values or beliefs is vulnerable if the organisation fails to protect or uphold the core values or beliefs being highlighted. A further vulnerability is that constituents may be inundated with similar appeals for support from competing organisations (Ibid). The make-up of the constituents in terms of individual perceptions and identities will affect which action frames are more or less likely to 'resonate'. For example, the level of homogeneity, gender, race, age, education and occupational identity of the constituents will impact the arguments that leaders draw on and in turn the frames employed will be influenced by identity factors and reconstructed through workplace interaction.

Collective interest definition is often taken as a given or as a stable aspect of trade unionism, particularly in some Marxist analyses. Yet, that individuals are members of a union or employed by an organisation does not automatically signify a collective definition of his or her interests. Collective interest definition affects the willingness of individuals to participate in trade union activities and without the willingness of individuals to actively support the union by becoming members or participating in mobilisations, the power of the union is weakened. The perceptions, identities and attitudes of the 'led' are considered an integral part of an analysis of union leadership

and the potential for collective interest definition. Whilst psychological explanations of collective action alone are on the whole considered an inadequate explanation for collectivism, the perceptions of individuals are an important part of understanding why collective identity and interest definition is or isn't sustained. Individual grievances are not a sufficient trigger for collective action as they may remain internalised without a sense of injustice, attribution and collective agency, these being key factors in social movement accounts of collective interest definition and identity (Gamson, 1992).

The framing approach allows for an analysis of the contested nature of union activity and recognises that the development, generation and elaboration of collective action frames are contested processes. Benford and Snow (2000) identify the possibility for 'frame disputes' within movements. There are 'framing processes' taking place within the movement organisation in relation to the movement's identity itself and 'identity constructions are considered an inherent feature of the framing process' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 632). Hunt et al suggest that framing processes link individuals and groups ideologically and they 'proffer, buttress, and embellish identities' (1994: 185). They do this in two ways, firstly 'by situating or placing relevant sets of actors in time and space and by attributing characteristics to them that suggest specifiable relationships and lines of action' (Ibid) and during the course of identity talk among adherents and activists (Hunt and Benford, 1994). Within organisation there is also the possibility for 'frame disputes' to develop between activists. That is how the organisation should frame its identity in relation to constituents. Therefore framing also helps us to understand the ways in which



activists go about constructing union identity through internal communication and the ‘mobilisation of bias’ (Batstone, 1978).

The framing processes concept can be used to analyse and present elements of the union’s activities and activists’ discourses. The focus of the framing processes perspective is *firstly* the linguistic construction of collective action frames by movement activists and *secondly* the processes by which they attempt to link collective action frames to constituents. This research explores these two dimensions of framing in the context of local level unionism in SUD-Rail and looks at ways that the concept can be developed and extended as an outcome of the research. The framing approach is particularly suited to studying trade unionism in France. Firstly, it can be argued that in the context of competitive unionism there is a heightened awareness of the need to construct and reconstruct a specific union identity. The ideological and political nature of unionism also implies that collective action frames will be important features distinguishing the unions. In relation to the SUD unions, the creation of SUD-Rail was contested in the SNCF and other trade unions and management attempted to prevent SUD-Rail from gaining representative rights. Having gained representative rights in the SNCF and a strong feature of the union’s identity has been its opposition to other confederations, notably the CGT and CFDT. The processes towards developing collective identity are more likely to be visible in this context and this strengthens the empirical validity of using the framing approach. The framing approach is also suitable due to the nature of trade union representation in French workplaces. In order to maintain and develop union organisation French unions need to obtain support in terms of votes from their constituents in the two-yearly workplace elections. There is thus a regular test of unions’ abilities to

successfully ‘align’ their organisation with a pre-defined set of constituents. The framing process approach allows for a wider analysis of the nature of support and participation by exploring support and participation in relation to constituents rather than just members. It is also an approach that can be generalised and used for researching other union movements and potentially in a comparative context. The following section presents a methodological approach appropriate for employing this concept.

### **Ethnography and thick description**

My research adopted an ethnographic approach, which I judged to be a rational choice for this particular study in light of the research questions and the conceptual approach. This approach allows the researcher to place individuals in a group context and gain a ‘realistic’ picture of the dynamics of individual and group behaviour (Whyte, 1984:26). The researcher is also in a position to observe the more subtle socio-cultural factors that shape these dynamics. An underlying assumption of this research is that union renewal and worker collectivism is socially constructed and can be further understood by looking at the social processes underlying unionism. This assumption is based on a constructionist epistemology, the view that ‘society is to be seen as socially constructed on the basis of how its members make sense of it and not as an objective reality’ (Walsh, 1998: 218). The constructivist approach is based on the epistemological assumption that the nature of the social world must be discovered and that this can only be achieved by first-hand observation and participation in ‘natural’ settings (Hammersley, 1992: 12). This research therefore draws on the approach of ethnomethodology, which is based on a constructionist



epistemology, and is interested in both how people *see* and *do* things. The questions identified in Chapter 2 are concerned with understanding how things happen in the union SUD-Rail and this implies a methodological approach that allows the researcher to observe and describe the behaviours and interactions of individuals within the specificities of the context in which they act (Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnography is a methodology that facilitates the exploration and understanding of complex social relations and their context and ‘involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions...collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:1).

The interpretations of the social world in ethnography produce what have been termed ‘theoretical’, ‘analytical’ or ‘thick’ descriptions (Hammersley, 1992). The ethnographic method places emphasis on description in order to allow readers a vicarious experience of what it is like to be in a type of place and seeing this from the point of view of the people involved (Hammersely, 1992: 22-23). However what is also offered in ethnographic accounts is a form of ‘theoretical’ description where the aim is to apply concepts and theories to an ethnographic description. Geertz argues that ethnographers test theories in the process of using them.

Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study; they are adapted from other related studies and refined in the process, applied to new interpretative problems. If they cease being useful with respect to such problems, they tend to stop being used and are more or less abandoned. If they continue to be useful,

throwing up new understandings, they are further elaborated and go on being used. (Geertz, 1973: 27)

Hammersley (1992: 22) argues that the theoretical descriptions produced by ethnographers differ little from descriptions and explanations employed in everyday life. He suggests that the distinctiveness of ethnographic accounts is not in their theoretical character but in the explicitness and coherence of the models employed and the rigour of the data collection and analysis on which they are based. This thesis aims to bridge the gap in descriptive research on French trade unions and to further *understanding* on the processes underlying union renewal in France. Where French researchers have used in-depth qualitative methods in the study of trade unions, the focus is often on relating the narratives of actors to broader sociological patterns (Contrepolis, 2003). This is in place of allowing outsiders an insight into the observed processes of trade unionism. French authors have privileged data collected from semi-structured interviews (for example, Contrepolis, 2003). Narratives provide rich data, but the advantage of an ethnographic methodology is that it allows for a presentation not only of what activists say but also of what activists do. In research on SUD-PTT and SUD-Rail discussed in Chapter 2, the methodology consisted of a period of immersion over two years in the unions with interviews conducted with the quasi-totality of representatives (Damesin and Denis, 2001). However, from this study we do not develop a sense of how activists deal with the tensions that the authors identify. There have been descriptive studies of trade union activities, which include the work of Dufour and Hege (2002). This study is based on a description of workplace representation in a company and goes some way to bridging the gap in empirically based studies exploring local level processes of unionism. However, in



general, the range of intellectual approaches in the study of trade unionism in France has been less sensitive to day-to-day realities than British approaches (Edwards, 2005: 267). Kelly (1998) argues that a weakness of the British tradition has been the dominance of descriptive accounts rather than on the development of theory. Research has tended to focus on 'concrete events at micro level rather than the wider structural conditions that shape behaviour' (Edwards, 2005:275). Yet the weakness of the British tradition is also its strength and studies on trade unionism have provided rich descriptions of the social processes of unionism (Batstone et al, 1977; 1978; Benyon, 1984; Pollert, 1981). These studies have aided in the development of theories on the nature collective interest definition in the workplace. This research seeks to contribute a theoretical description by applying the framing concept to the study of unionism. An ethnographic approach is necessary if we want to understand the dynamics and realities of framing. This approach has advantages over interviews as it is able to get at discourse as it is practised concretely. Studies adopting a discourse analysis approach often use interviews and thus face problem of people playing roles or engaging in self justification. This research attempts to overcome these limitations through presenting discourses in context.

This research seeks to apply the concept of framing to unionism in SUD-Rail. The intervening narrative chapters (Chapters 5-8) deal with the empirical and analytical questions set out in Chapter 2, but also consider different aspects of framing. Chapter 5 considers the internal processes of communication in relation to how union activists go about building a union identity and engage in identity talk. Chapter 6 focuses more on the ways in which activists encourage support and participation from members. Chapter 7 examines the ways in which activists engage in the

workplace, and how they use workplace representative institutions to help construct a SUD approach and identity in the workplace. Chapter 8 considers the ways in which activists developed a radical regional union identity that was focused on direct action and confrontation. A detailed analysis of the framing processes observed in the regional union is revisited in Chapter 9 in the discussion and conclusions of the research. In order to be able to operationalise the framing concept set out in this section, the research requires a form of thick description detailing the social processes underlying collective organisation. In light of the above discussion this research prioritised the method of participant observation. A detailed account of the issues surrounding this method is discussed in the following section.

### **A reflexive account of participant observation**

In this section I discuss the methodological issues surrounding participant observation, detailing how I accessed the research site, how I established relationships with the research participants and how my role developed in the study. I also explore the processes involved in data collection and issues to do with language and customs when conducting research in a foreign language. Detailing the process of my integration into the union is important as it helps the reader understand in more depth the socio-cultural context in which the research was carried out. There are also two methodologically based reasons for detailing the process of the research. Firstly, the account can be used as a way of assessing the reliability of the findings. Meardi argues that 'since the way data are collected can bias the findings so profoundly, there is a strong need, even stronger than in quantitative studies, to detail the relevant context of the enquiry' (2000: 96). It allows the reader to gain an idea of



the rigour of data collection. A second reason is that in ethnographic research the methodology becomes an integral part of the findings (Mehan, 1979). Therefore many of the insights presented in this account can be used to form part of the general findings of the research. In September 2003 I moved to Paris for a year to conduct an ethnographic study in a regional union (*syndicat régionale*) within the federation of SUD-Rail. I spent three months negotiating access and conducting background research before beginning a period of full-time participant observation in the union SUD-Rail from January 2004. In Chapter 4 I present the railway sector and union context in more detail, but in this chapter I make references to the ‘regional union’ and the main activists who participated in the study. As an aid to this chapter, the profiles of the union activists mentioned in this chapter are presented in Chapter 4 in Figure 4.3 and a diagram of union organisation in SUD-Rail is represented in Figure 4.2.

Field research access is not always a straightforward procedure and often involves negotiation and renegotiation throughout the field research (Burgess, 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). During my research I did not experience many problems gaining access. There was initial confusion of the activists understanding exactly what I was looking to do, but this is perhaps more pronounced with ethnography due to the open-ended nature of the approach. The fact that my explanations were not in my maternal language may have also led to misunderstandings about the nature of the research, and the idea that I just wanted to ‘hang around’ was sometimes difficult to get across to participants. In common with Delbridge (1998), in his ethnographic research on employee relations under Japanese manufacturing, I found that I stood out like a sore thumb at first. Yet, as is often the

case, through regular participation in union activities I was able to overcome these initial anxieties. From the outset of my request for access, the activists were often surprised that I was conducting research on them rather than the CGT. They were curious as to how I had found out about them, how I had made contact and why I wanted to research them. In the initial weeks some of the activists joked that I was probably a spy for management and as the research went on activists were curious to know what I was finding out about them and what I thought about the union.

Certain activists were often keen to make clear that by studying them I was not studying a union like the others, that SUD-Rail was 'special' in comparison to other unions. On one occasion in the workplace, an activist from the CGT said to me that by studying SUD-Rail I was not getting a representative picture of unionism in the sector or in France in general. The activist also said that the region I was in was special and was important and different from other regions in terms of union organisation. This brings up an important issue in single case study ethnographies in relation to the 'generalizability' of the research. Although I spent all my time with one regional union in SUD-Rail, I did get impressions of the other unions from observations in the workplace, from mobilisations and from opinions from workers and activists. In the initial stages I also undertook unstructured interviews with activists in SUD-Rail in other union regions to get some idea of how their functioning compared with the region being researched. From these impressions I became aware that in many of the contexts the regional unions, whether from SUD-Rail or the CGT considered that they were 'special' in some sense. However, it is clear that the regional union of SUD-Rail being researched was a critical case as it was one of the two founding unions of SUD-Rail. This highlights the issue of the



kinds of general conclusion that can be drawn from single case study research. Hammersley (1992) argues that the issue of generalizability needs to be discussed as ethnographers often claim that their research has general significance beyond local circumstances. He identifies two types of generalizability offered from ethnographic studies: empirical generalization and theoretical inference. Empirical generalization occurs when ethnographers claim that the particular setting investigated is typical of some larger whole or aggregate. The empirical generalization from this thesis would be to take the empirical tendencies observed in the regional union of SUD-Rail as typical of practices in all regional unions in SUD-Rail and even in the SUD unions more generally. In order to make empirical generalizations Hammersley argues that ethnographers should make rational decisions about the population to which generalization is to be made, and to collect and present evidence about the likely typicality of the cases studied (1992: 93). I recognise the difficulties of making empirical generalizations from a single case study, but I argue that with reflection and clarity about the population and time period to which generalization is being attempted it is possible to make some general statements about the nature of unionism in the federation of SUD-Rail, and in SUD unions more generally from researching one regional union. Furthermore, the common institutional context within which the unions operate also allows us to make some statements on the nature of unionism in France.

The second type of generalization offered by ethnographic research is theoretical inference, with theory representing statements about necessary relationships among categories of phenomena. Theoretical inference is where ethnographers draw conclusions about one or more social scientific theories from the features of the local

events they observe and describe. Theoretical inference is premised on the existence of universal, deterministic, sociological laws. However, most ethnographers reject claims that such laws exist arguing that ‘human behaviour is creative and formative, at least within limits’ (Ibid). The approach adopted in this thesis is inductive, where the task has not been to impose an analytical framework on to social action, but to explore interpretations from empirical observations. The survey of the literatures and debates in unionism in Chapters 1 and 2 identified questions for further exploration, but the aim was not to generate hypotheses to be tested in empirical research as a way of validating or rejecting particular theories. The aim was to identify patterns of research areas and useful concepts, and to identify questions for further exploration. Chapter 9 of this thesis offers theoretical inferences on questions surrounding unionism drawing from existing theories and considers the applicability of the framing approach.

### *Initial research and key informants*

My access and integration was facilitated by the fact that a British union activist had given me contacts for the French unions. The contacts were for union activists from two of the most established unions in the sector, SUD-Rail and the CGT. I had an encouraging response from SUD-Rail and after having an initial interview with Sophie (see page ?), a member of the SUD-Rail federation council, my request for conducting research was put to the federation executive and was accepted in early January 2004. Sophie was my gatekeeper to the union and in the initial stages I relied on her to give me contacts and to give me access to union settings. She had made it clear that it would not be possible for her to be very involved in my research



as she was too busy but she was happy to put me in contact with other activists from other union regions. She invited me along to a meeting of the union's women's committee and seemed to assume that being female and having contacted one of the only high-profile women in the union I was interested in the role of women in the union. She gave me the contacts of all the key women activists in SUD-Rail. This proved an interesting introduction to SUD-Rail as the women's committee spent much of the time debating the necessity of having the committee in light of the lack of interest at the regional level to women's issues. Whilst the role of women in the union was not a focus of my research, I took advantage of the willingness of participants to give contact details and for their interest to become involved in the research. It also proved to be a useful observation later in the research, as the subject of the women's committee was discussed in the regional union. I made use of the contacts to help me negotiate access to my region of research. I started research in a SUD-Rail region using one of the contacts from my gatekeeper, but after conducting a couple of interviews I had little success in the follow-up. Franck was the gatekeeper for this region and I was unable to negotiate participation in ongoing activities. I decided to contact another union region, the second most organised in terms of membership for the union. Through luck, good timing, a bit of experience on how to push my research forward and a genuinely interested group of activists I started to observe and participate in the daily activities of the union. Thus my selection of research site was in part determined by the ease of access to the setting and the possibilities for continuous participation (Burgess, 1984). In total, I observed union activity in SUD-Rail for five months full-time, and was in contact with the union for 12 months in total. A chronology of the main observations is presented below.

**Figure 3.2 Chronology of research observations**

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| 21 January 2004 | Strike in customer services and operations in the region  |
| 22 January      | Women's committee at the federation level   |
| 28 January      | National strike in SNCF   |
| 2 February      | Regional executive meeting  |
| 10 February     | Legal service in the regional union taken by Sylvestre  |
| 16 February     | Regional executive meeting  |
| 23 February     | Regional council meeting  |
| 1 March         | Regional executive meeting; Demonstration and concert in support of social protection for precarious workers  |
| 2 March         | Occupation of CE against the introduction of independent ticket offices; union rounds (tourn  e syndicale) in the customer and operations section (Jean-Marc, Gerard) for collecting letters for the grading rounds ('notation') and for distributing election propaganda |
| 3 March         | Trade union rounds in customer service and operations section (Didier, Pascal, Marie, Gerard) for collecting grading letters and for distributing election propaganda   |
| 15 March        | Occupation of grading negotiations in customer services and operations  |
| 22 March        | Regional executive meeting  |
| 23 March        | Union rounds for workplace elections  |
| 24 March        | Union rounds for workplace elections  |
| 25 March        | Workplace elections for CE and DP; party to wait for results in regional union office   |
| 26 March        | Special post-election executive meeting   |
| 29 March        | Regional council meeting  |
| 1 April         | Hearing at regional tribunal for obtaining representative status in cleaning company (Sylvestre); second hearing and decision on 6 May.   |
| 5 April         | National demonstration for contract workers (PS25) outside SNCF national headquarters. Activists from regional union attempted to prevent director of SNCF from leaving the building by wrapping chains around the entrances to the building                              |
| 8 April         | Regional executive meeting  |
| 22 April        | Regional executive meeting  |



|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 26 April    | Training for DP representatives taken by George   |
| 27 April    | Federation council meeting  |
| 28 April    | Training for new members taken by Philippe  |
| 1 May       | National demonstration for the increase in minimum social standards, against pension reforms, protection of the right to strike, and of public services   |
| 6 May       | Second hearing for representative status in cleaning company by Sylvestre. Tribunal refused representation on ground of lack of union members, support and activity in the company  |
| 10 May      | Regional executive meeting  |
| 12 May      | Training for DP representative (2nd day) taken by George  |
| 13 May      | Regional strike on the plan to privatise freight transport. Occupation of regional management offices then attempt to occupy national headquarters. Rally was held outside as SNCF management shut down the entrances and exits to the building before the arrival of activists |
| 27 May      | Demonstration with EDF for the defence of public services   |
| 3 June      | Training/meeting for cleaning activists/representatives taken by Sylvestre  |
| 4 June      | Regional council meeting; party at the regional union for retirement of Christophe and Louis  |
| 5 June      | National demonstration against the reform of medical insurance  |
| 12-13 June  | National drivers strike   |
| 15 June     | Union rounds in cleaning section for distributing tract on occupation of CE for 22 June. Taken by Sylvestre, Abdul and Mai  |
| 15 June     | Rally for the defence of public services and medical insurance (Sylvestre, Abdul and Mai joined the rally for two hours around lunchtime in between union rounds)   |
| 16 June     | Strike by administrative workers from the region  |
| 22 June     | Occupation of CE by regional union activists and cleaning workers   |
| 28 June     | Regional executive meeting  |
| 5-6 October | Regional union congress   |

During the first month I was based in a regional union office of SUD-Rail where I was mainly observing meetings and daily union activities. In the second month, I shadowed trade union activists in several sections around the region. I also participated in trade union actions, including strike rallies, sit-ins and demonstrations, and continued to attend the regular meetings held at the union office. The following months were spent accompanying activists whilst they carried out their duties. I continued to observe the regular meetings at the union office throughout this period and attended strike rallies and demonstrations within the region and also on a national level.

My research involved contact with activists from all of the 12 union sections in the regional union and I was given the opportunity to observe different occupations. However, the majority of my time was spent at the regional union office. In total I was in contact with around seventy activists, members and workers and was in regular contact with around 30 activists. Around 15 were more active in the regional union than at the section level. The majority of the 15 held official positions within on the union executive and were often responsible for leading their particular section. The remaining activists held elected representative positions or were active in their particular section. I was in contact with these remaining activists when on visits to the workplace or during union actions, and they were occasionally at the regional union office. I have used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the activists, members and workers. In the presentation of the activists in Chapter 4 it is important to take into consideration the problem of distinguishing exactly which activists were allocated to carry out the difference roles. The official roles interchanged frequently as there were deputies for each of the elected positions. Each of the activists claimed



to be a ‘délégué syndical’ (DS) just by the fact of being involved in trade unionism and I have worked under the assumption that each of the activists was an allocated DS.

There were around fifteen non-active members and workers with whom I met and spoke to whilst with union activists. I was sometimes able to question them on their own but I was mainly observing them interacting with the activists. Some of these members were just beginning to get involved in unionism and were often encouraged by the SUD-Rail activists to become more involved in the regional union. The non-members that the activists talked to were often ‘sympathisers’ of SUD-Rail and voted for them in workplace elections. I was also exposed to activists from the emerging union section in cleaning. These activists had a private sector status and either held elected representative positions or had become activists in their company with the backing of the regional union. SUD-Rail was deemed representative in 4 out of the 5 privatised cleaning companies working in the railways. The regional union was trying to build up a union section in the fifth company while the research was being conducted. As SUD-Rail did not have legal recognition in all workplaces, as do the larger confederations like the CGT and the CFDT, they were required to go through a legal process to prove that they were representative. My key informant in the research was in charge of building up union organisation in the cleaning companies. This meant I had good access to activists in this area and was able to follow my key informant on workplace tours. However, data on employees in this section was difficult to get hold of as employers refused to give employee numbers to activists.

The majority of activists in SUD-Rail were men, around 80 per cent of the total. There were seven women out of the 30 main activists who held elected positions in their respective sections, either as *délégués du personnel* or as health and safety representatives. There was one female activist on the regional executive and 4 women on the regional council. The majority of activists were aged between 35 and 55, with around five out of the thirty being younger. The majority of the activists were white, although the 15 cleaning section activists who were present for union training on building union representation in this section were from ethnic minority backgrounds. The 30 main activists were from a widespread of sections in the region, yet there were a greater number, 13 out of the 30, from the biggest union section of customer service and operations workers. This was the most organised union section in the region in terms of members, activists and elected positions. I therefore spent the majority of time with activists from the customer service and operations section. However I also became involved in the union sections for privately employed cleaners and contract workers. These sections were run by Sylvestre and Jean-Paul because the cleaning and contract activists had fewer resources to be able to do so.

The timing of my research influenced the type of data collected as I was observing the union during a period of heightened activity. The representative elections take place every two years and I was observing during an election year. The union had its own social rhythm, and data collected during spring, for example produced different results from observations made during the summer months. During that period there was little activity in the union in contrast to an increase in activity during autumn, winter and spring. This fluctuation in activity is important in relation to how I left



the 'field'. Writers on ethnography suggest that leaving the research arena can be difficult, but in my circumstance, the slow-down of union activity towards the end of June allowed me to decrease participation gradually and finally withdraw at a point natural in the union cycle. My first observation was a union meeting held at the regional union office. I had arranged to meet Marie, a member of the regional union executive and who was my initial contact for the region. She was not present at the meeting because of personal commitments but Jacques, the regional union secretary, said he had been told about me coming and I was invited to stay anyway. For my first day of observation I was invited to have lunch with the activists, as the meeting was to continue all day. The activists prepared lunch in the regional office and a contribution was paid by each of the activists. When it came round for me to pay, the executive members told me I was not to pay, as I was their 'guest'. Discussing this initial observation is important for more than the reason of methodological reflexivity, as 'the phases involved in access to the field reveal much information which must become an integral part of the piece of research' (Meardi, 2000: 96). Being warmly received by the union activists suggested a degree of openness to outsiders, and an enthusiasm towards those interested in the union.

On a daily basis the activists prepared lunch for themselves. An activist informed me that Louis, one of the older activists who helped create SUD-Rail in 1996, encouraged them to eat together and prepare their own food, as it was less expensive and more sociable. It was often Louis who would prepare the lunch, but if not him there were usually two or three activists who did the shopping and cooking. This often meant that mid-morning some of the activists would leave meetings to prepare the lunch. Lunch would often begin with a drink (*aperitif*) at midday and continue

on until 2pm, sometimes later. There were jugs of red wine with the lunch, which I at first thought was linked to it being the occasion of a meeting, but on a daily basis there was wine with the lunch. At the first meeting I accepted the wine, but on having a rather confused and unproductive afternoon in terms of note taking and understanding, I requested water at future lunches. A couple of months into the research Louis opened the fridge when I entered the kitchen to show me that they had bought some orange juice. After a couple of weeks observation of meetings and other activities, I came to realise that lunch was an important part of the union daily routine and many activists seem to view it as positive that I stayed and had lunch with them. I turned down lunch a couple of times, firstly when I had another engagement, and then a second time to observe the reaction. Union leaders made comments that maybe I was not happy with the food or with their company. I noticed that certain union leaders levelled this criticism at other activists. This was the case with Sylvestre when Louis prepared tripe for lunch. Sylvestre whispered to me during the meeting that the smell in the room was the tripe cooking next door. He asked me if I liked tripe and I said no. When the meeting stopped for lunch he told Louis that because he was a vegetarian he would not stay and he also said to me in front of the other activists not to stay and to tell them that I did not like tripe. Louis appeared to be annoyed by Sylvestre's reaction and said it was not possible that we did not like tripe. I stayed for lunch but I ate only the starter. The other activists made jokes about British cooking and said that I was probably used to eating sandwiches for lunch. Staying for lunch at the union regional office thus became an important part of my participation. It was a useful way of building up a rapport with the representatives and also allowed me to keep up with what was going on in the union and at the section level. I was also able to get a better idea of the



roles played by the activists and to see how they interacted in more informal situations.

The activists got used to me 'hanging around' the union office and I found that it became easier to involve myself in union activities as my time spent in the office increased. In the initial research, participation in the more informal side of union daily routines like lunch meant that I was very open to questions and requests for my opinion from the activists. I tried to counter this by asking questions myself or responding naively or vaguely, but inevitably because of my presence as an outsider I was of interest to them and the frequency of different people coming and going in the union meant that in the initial stages I was rarely if ever in the 'background'. However, as the intensive observation period was carried out over a period of five months, people tended to act more naturally in my presence as time went on. This is not to suggest that my presence did not influence or bias the data collected as in most situations participants were aware of my role as a researcher. Nevertheless, the activists seemed to pay less attention to me after the initial few months.

The research was made easier by having a few key informants who kept me up to date with what was happening in the union and invited me to different union activities. The selection of participants and informants was a mixture of judgement and opportunistic sampling (see Burgess, 1984). In the initial stages, my informants were chosen opportunistically and were those who were available and willing to cooperate with the research. Yet when I had established a rapport with some informants, I was more able to select further participants based on criteria of their role within the union. My key informant, Sylvestre, said he was interested in my

research after the first meeting. He had not been involved in trade unionism for long and had joined SUD-Rail after being convinced by two key SUD-Rail activists in 2000. He said he was therefore learning a lot himself and was keen to talk about unionism. He became important for introducing me to others and organising for me to participate in union activities. Sylvestre was my 'sponsor' in the initial stages and this meant that I became involved in his networks in the union. I made use of these networks to gain access to different groups of informants. Yet, I was often referred back to my initial informant as other participants viewed him as my sponsor. This reflects a dilemma in ethnographic research where sponsors may shift from being obstructive and facilitative and where 'the ethnographer may find it difficult to achieve independence...discovering that his or her research is bounded by the social horizon of a sponsoring group or individual' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 75). This is important as the time I spent with Sylvestre is reflected in the data and he was someone who talked more openly the more time I spent with him. Another key informant was Jacques as he was permanently based at the union office and he was able to give me details of union activities. He was active in other social movements and would invite me to come on other demonstrations not directly organised by the union. Otherwise there was a core of around 10 activists who spent most days or parts of the day engaged in some form of trade union activity at the office. There were three permanent officials at any one time, the secretary and two other activists who alternated each month. The union had a treasurer who was not permanent but who spent much of the week at the union. There were between 5 -15 activists in the union office at any one time and there were often more who came around lunchtime and at the end of the day.



Overall, I did not have as much access to workers as originally intended. I concentrated on building up relationships with the activists in the regional union, which became my base, and did not seek permission from management. This meant that when participating in workplace activities or actions the activists told me to take on the role of union activist or railway worker. This was especially the case when the activists disrupted management-union meetings where I participated under the guise of being a union activist. This was a useful way to see how union activists acted in front of management and allowed me to participate in trade union mobilisations. My access to the workplace was restricted mainly to trade union rounds ('tournées') where union activists visit workplaces to pick up questions for délégué du personnel (DP) meetings and to distribute the latest union tract. The 'tournées' were important during the run-up to the workplace elections and during the 'notation' period, the yearly grading negotiations. The representatives also conducted workplace tours in the run-up to union actions.

An important point to mention in terms of my methodology and access to the workplace is that most of my informants were not often at work while I was conducting my research. Although they were not full-time union officials, they had access to hours from their elected roles and from the union which meant that some activists who took on several roles, spent most of their time on union activities. I was told by Sylvestre that George was often meant to be working, but the employer was so afraid of him that they did not question his presence, or lack of, at work. In addition, my research was conducted from Monday-Friday and mainly during the daytime. One of the exceptions was on the day of the workplace elections, where the union activists were in the local union office until 2am waiting for the results. I

stayed until around midnight. I found it useful to observe union activists in different settings, as I was able to comment on how language and behaviours changed for different audiences. For example, I found that activists often changed their behaviour and language when in front of workers or members, whether at the workplace or in the union. The activists would often then assess the interaction they had had with workers with me or with each other. It was also useful to spend time with the representatives individually as they were often willing to give information about other activists and talk about their perceptions of unionism and how they saw their role in the union and in the workplace.

The presence of other unions in the workplace was another important side to the research as I was exposed to activists in direct competition with the union I was researching. It was mainly the CGT and SUD-Rail representing workers in the region. Other unions were well represented in certain occupational categories, for example, the CFDT, whose support base has been declining in the region since 1996, were still popular amongst train guards and conductors. Also, the FGAAC, an occupationally based union representing train drivers, scored highly in workplace elections. Nevertheless, the only other union activists with whom I was in contact during my time with SUD-Rail were from the CGT. The rivalry seemed friendly at times and was amicable in certain locations, especially in workplaces where SUD-Rail and the CGT had equal support. Yet, there were incidences of less friendly behaviour from CGT activists where SUD-Rail was the majority union and vice versa. In documents of union correspondence there were often exchanges between the two unions where one or the other had sought to sabotage or disrupt the activities of the other. The tension between the two unions was brought into my research as



SUD-Rail activists proudly introduced me to CGT activists and made comments suggesting that I had chosen to research the best union. I found this quite awkward in the initial stages especially as I was hoping to conduct some research in the CGT after my time with SUD-Rail. The rivalry between the two unions influenced my research and I decided not to conduct comparative research in the CGT as I did not want to threaten my access to SUD-Rail and risk problems gaining access to the CGT, having chosen to research SUD-Rail first.

### *Finding a role in ethnography*

My role in the union evolved during the field research. At first I slipped naturally into the role as ‘acceptable incompetent’ (Lofland, 1974). My research involved mainly participant observation and this meant I consciously tried to develop a ‘working role’ in the union. I felt this necessary firstly to justify my presence and temper any suspicions, and secondly to make the time I spent in the union less stressful and more purposeful. In the union I helped out with mailings and made myself useful during meetings. Some of the activists were keen to make me feel part of the union and during union actions I regularly wore the union’s sticker. The activists considered this necessary for some occasions when in the presence of management as the managers were not aware of my status as a researcher. During one of the strike rallies I held a union flag. Jean-Paul, an activist who at times I had felt was uncomfortable about my presence in the union, handed me a large union flag during the rally. I said I did not feel comfortable holding the flag as we would be confronting management and I was trying to keep a low profile. In response he said ‘*if you are here you can do something*’ and walked on handing flags to others in the

group. Jacques seemed to notice that I was uncomfortable holding the flag and came and took it from me. I felt that the activists were not satisfied with my reason for not wanting to hold the flag and I felt awkward amongst the activists. This highlights the tension in ethnography between wanting to be an insider and the feeling that the researcher should not become too involved in the research.

I was conscious in the beginning of my role as a female in a male-dominated setting. During the first day of participation my field note diary contained this entry on how I felt in this context:

I sat with Jacques and David at the table and we first made small talk. Jacques was asking me about my research and I tried to explain in my best French what I was doing. The problem was I was much more concerned that I was the only female amongst 20 odd men. I felt very self conscious and was having trouble explaining myself to Jacques.

The issue of my being female was brought up by some of the activists. At the end of the first day a female activist came into the room and the union secretary pointed to her and said '*see we do have women here, you are not the only one*'. The regional union was male dominated which to a large extent reflected the composition of employees within the railway sector. But it can also be interpreted as reflecting what Pernot (2005:311) describes as the 'masculine militant model' (*le modèle militant masculine*), which dominates French trade unionism.



My role shifted between ‘participant-as-observer’ and ‘observer-as-participant’ throughout the research. Whilst I did not take up a position within the union, I participated in activities as a union activist during mobilisations and in the workplace. I was only semi-involved in most situations which allowed me to function as a researcher-participant. I found the role difficult to maintain at times as I became inadvertently involved in activities that I had thought I was observing. For example, in the ‘new member training’, which is discussed in Chapter 6, when the participants were asked to introduce themselves, they also asked me to introduce myself. I introduced myself as being Scottish and currently undertaking research on trade unionism in France. During the session, when talking about the problems of privatisation, Benjamin referred to me and said that I could confirm the problems that were happening in the railways in England. I responded by saying it was ‘a complicated situation’, which he interpreted as affirmation of the problems. On another occasion Benjamin was talking about the problems in America to do with liberalisation, and he pointed towards me saying, ‘and in England’. Thus I became an integral part of the frame alignment processes, where Benjamin used my presence to try to encourage support and to legitimise his arguments. This manifests the problems of researcher bias during participant observation and the impossibilities of maintaining absolute neutrality since the researcher is a part of the social world that is being studied (Delbridge, 1998).

After spending a few months mainly based in the regional union office I became concerned that certain activists were taking me less seriously. This may have been a factor of my becoming too comfortable within the research setting. There is a potential in participant observation for researchers to abandon the task of analysis ‘in

favour of the joys of participation' and biases may arise from 'over-rapport' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 110). Although I was concerned about over-rapport, in retrospect I regard this stage as one where I had reached a level of 'saturation' in relation to my understanding of activities in the regional union. The concerns passed as I participated in different activities and concentrated on areas of research yet unexplored. For example I participated in a campaign by the union to organise the privatised cleaning workers in the region. This was organised by Sylvestre and opened up access to a different setting and group of workers.

During the research some key activists brought up my role and the methodology of my research. On one occasion, whilst having lunch at the regional union, Jean-Paul, who I mention above, said he was aware that my research was '*becoming dangerous*' for them. I asked him why and he responded that it was because nobody paid any attention to me anymore and did not watch what they were saying in front of me. Another activist, Benjamin, who overheard the conversation, said that it was only a problem if there was something to hide. Jean-Paul replied that I was observing the practice of the union that may at times not correspond with the principles and ideas they try to uphold. This conversation then turned into a debate about the functioning of the union, which was a common debate between these two activists who disagreed on how the union should be managed and the political motivations of some activists. In this instance, my presence produced an interesting reflection from the participants on the nature of my study and on the nature of what they perceived could be the potential findings from my observations.



There are issues surrounding the conduct of research in a foreign country in a non-maternal language and it arguably affects both the quality of the data collected and the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of research. I was not bilingual on starting my research but had an advanced knowledge of written and spoken French. This was particularly the case after having had a period of three months before starting my participant observation to develop my knowledge of the language. The language was initially a barrier as I was exposed to unfamiliar vocabularies and registers of speech. This eased as time went on but I nonetheless encountered several issues, which caused problems for my research. One problem was that some activists took my foreign status to mean that I did not understand what was being said and what was happening in the union. This may have been a consequence of the presumably 'naïve' questions I would be asking before, during and after events, and generally during interaction with activists. To an extent this was true, especially in the early stages of the research where I had difficulty understanding everything the activists would say, particularly as there were acronyms, words and phrases that were new to me. There was a lot of work that went into interpreting the meanings of words and phrases and events within the context. This was the case when each time I met a new activist I would ask if he or she was a 'délégué syndical' (DS). All of the activists responded yes to this question, and at one stage Sylvestre, who had overheard me asking the question said that all the activists in the union were a DS otherwise they would not have been there. My understanding of the DS was that they were officially appointed representatives, but in fact it was difficult to make out who were the official DS as

the regional union worked on the understanding that all activists engaged in some activity in the union were a DS. In another example I asked Jacques his thoughts on the outcome of the meeting. He laughed and responded asking me whether I had been listening and said he thought it was clear in the meeting what the outcome had been. At the same time, my foreign status may have also proved conducive to my research. I found that most activists assumed that with my foreign status they had a 'knowledge advantage' (Meardi, 2000) and were keen to give detailed explanations, often asking me whether I knew what certain words meant. There was a dilemma in these instances of not wanting to appear too familiar or knowledgeable about certain issues, and avoiding the risk of being treated as a 'naïve tourist' (2000:90). In relation to my status as a foreigner in the union, an interesting feature of the research was my identity as being Scottish. On the first day of my research the activists asked where I was from in the UK and I told them I was born in Scotland. Michel said that it was better that I was Scottish because they could criticise the English and I would not be offended. Many of the key activists attributed England with neo-liberalism and were very critical of the privatisation of the railways in the UK. The fact that the activists identified me as being Scottish perhaps made it easier for them to be more critical of England in my presence. This may have helped neutralise certain biases which may have occurred during the research.

In the initial stages of the research I was not familiar with basic customs and practices within the union and within France more generally. An example was the act of meeting and greeting people, which is important in the initial stages of field research. It is important for making a good impression in any form of research but particularly in ethnography when relationships need to be maintained over a period



of time. Although I was already aware that in France the act of greeting people was relatively structured, in social settings for example, I was unaware how this operated in a workplace or organisation environment. The significance of this seemed greater being a female researcher as the act of meeting and greeting was more complex, and it was often difficult to make out the rules. I discerned early on that there were two ways of greeting between men and women in the union, firstly, shaking hands, and secondly, what is termed 'faire les bises', which is either kissing both cheeks once or kissing both cheeks twice (another variation was three kisses, which was a custom from the South of France and sometimes from those living in Paris, and was very difficult to predict). At the beginning of the research I shook hands with the activists I met, an instinctive reaction as an outsider and in a 'formal' context. I was aware that in the union the most common greeting between men and women, and between some men, was kissing both cheeks twice. Although this is a common form of greeting between French people, usually of those who know each other well or those living in certain regions of France, I also interpreted it as a symbolic act between activists in the union. This is based on a personal interpretation, as when I asked French colleagues outside the research context, as to the significance of this greeting practice, they responded that they did not really reflect upon the difference of kissing both cheeks once or twice. The interpretation is founded on the observation of greetings over time where the greeting between individuals who did not form part of SUD-Rail, work colleagues, for example, or activists from different unions, was on the whole just two kisses.

In the act of greeting I unconsciously waited for people to approach me. Yet a few months into my research I discussed this with French colleagues outside my research

who explained to me that it was generally the responsibility of the person arriving last in the room to 'do the round' (*faire le tour*) of greeting everyone. I was probably excused by some for not knowing this custom because of my 'foreigner' status but on reflection I felt that it was something that may have slowed my integration and made my relationship with certain activists more difficult. There is the possibility that some of the activists were not aware that the act of meeting and greeting was different elsewhere. I became aware of this when Fathi accused me of not speaking to him, as I had not sought out to greet him when I arrived. The act of meeting and greeting people was confusing throughout my field research and it was something I was confronted with on a daily basis. The more time I spent at the union the easier it became, especially with those activists with whom I was in constant contact, but towards the end I was using different forms of greeting with different activists, which I interpreted as being a factor of the time I had spent with them, the context of the encounter and their attitudes towards me. On the surface this may seem like an unimportant issue, but in ethnography it manifests the insider-outsider dilemma and it shows that even in relatively similar cultures there are everyday customs that initially seem strange and difficult to comprehend. It would appear that as the greeting became more informal, the more activists in the union accepted me. This aspect of ethnography also shows that after a period of time in the field people are more likely to act naturally in front of the researcher. Also, the informality of the greeting and the way I was treated was evidently influenced by how the activists wanted to be presented in my research. Treating me as an 'insider' was of interest to them in terms of how their identity was being projected to me. For some maintaining a more formal greeting with me could be interpreted as a conscious act to reinforce my outsider status in the union. I felt this was the case with Jean-Paul, as his



greeting towards me did not change during the research, whereas with most of the other activists there was a shift from shaking hands to 'faire les bises'. For the activists with which I developed a more informal greeting, my presence was perhaps not considered a threat and they saw me more as a part of the union.

### **Data collection, analysis and interpretation**

The data collected on observations and activists' narratives were in the form of field notes written during or soon after observations. Whilst at the union office I was usually able to take notes as I was observing meetings where note taking was a normal activity. On a couple of occasions my note taking became an issue in meetings. During an argument an activist sitting next to me was watching me writing and said that I should not write down any of the argument. He laughed and told me not to tell anybody outside the union about what had gone on. I felt conscious about my writing as the argument continued and I stopped taking notes. On another occasion when two activists were disagreeing over an issue during a meeting I was told by one of them to write down everything, as it would show people outside how ridiculous their arguments were. This caused a conflict between the other activists, as they said they would rather not have this behaviour disclosed. For other forms of activity, it was often difficult to take notes, for example during mobilisations and actions involving confrontations with management. During workplace rounds it was also difficult taking notes but I kept a pen in my pocket and a small notepad and wrote down key words where possible. The environment did not lend itself to audio taping particularly when I was in the union office, which was often noisy and busy. During initial interviews with activists we were interrupted

several times with people coming in and out and the participants stopped talking to me to answer phone calls, to introduce me to people and to carry out other activities, such as stuffing envelopes with tracts. The interviews were also held in rooms where other people were engaged in activities. At first, I was concerned that the format and conduct of the interview did not meet my expectations, and it appeared that the activists were not concentrating on the interview. In these instances I was put off taking my tape recorder out of my bag. However, on reflection, the behaviour of the activists was potentially a consequence of three factors, two methodological and one that gives an indication of the nature of activism itself. Firstly, the initial interviews were unstructured in nature, and I did not organise the interview on the basis of it lasting a certain time or covering a particular list of subjects, as the main aim was to build a rapport that would lead to participant observation of union activity. Secondly, it could be argued that my being a young (and perhaps female) researcher dressed very casually in order to 'fit in' enhanced my status as 'student' rather than a 'researcher', and my presence was perhaps taken less seriously.

Thirdly, as an initial observation on the nature of activism, it appeared that the activists were engaged in a constant flow of activity. In spite of the fact that they had set aside time to meet with me, they were still involved in the day-to-day of union activity. The apparent lack of concern regarding my presence in time became an advantage, as the activists appeared to be relatively unaffected by my presence and continued on with their activities. The data was thus collected in the form of field notes on observations and interviews and documentary data of which I collected as much as was available to me. The documents included minutes of meetings, union propaganda and union produced literature on training and procedures, including



those for workplace elections. The documents presented an important resource for the research. However, the documents are not accepted as unproblematic resources for accessing information on the union. The ways in which documents were constructed forms an important part of the research that follows. I recognise the limitations of using field notes as the main data source, but over the research period I was rigorous with note taking and made the decision early on that this was the best compromise in a situation where I wanted the research participants to act as ‘naturally’ as possible in my presence. I was aware that even without a notepad or a tape recorder my presence was sometimes viewed as suspicious or was remarked upon by some activists. I felt that I would have developed a different role in the union if I had insisted on tape recording, but as it is not possible to know whether it was the right decision I argue that it can be justified from both a methodological perspective and from the instinct of the researcher in the field.

The activists’ narratives are taken from field notes, where I wrote down direct translations into English of what the activists were saying. This was another decision made early on in the field research and I justify the decision in relation to the speed that was required for note taking and because writing in English meant that I was less concerned with activists’ seeing what I was writing. During meetings I was often sitting directly next to activists and they would sometimes look to see what I was writing. When I was unsure of vocabulary or mistranslation I wrote down the French words, and I was consistent in collecting any documents relating to conversations, for example those taking place in meetings, in order to ensure I was representing the activists as accurately as possible. My approach has limitations and the status of the research becomes one of trust, that is that the reader has to trust that the researcher

has provided an account as representative as possible. Yet, I accept that I am involved in the construction of a particular interpretation of the events observed, and a focus on specific aspects of the environment and people I was observing. In relation to the validity of the findings, Meardi (2000) suggest that the appropriate criteria for measuring the validity of qualitative research are in relation to 'familiarity' and 'coherence'. At the time of leaving the field I argue that I had what Meardi (2000) terms a 'deep familiarity' with the population I was observing. However, a criticism of ethnographic research is that the data which ethnographers use is argued to be a 'product of their participation in the field rather than a mere reflection of the phenomenon studied, and/or is constructed in and through the process of analysis and the writing of ethnographic accounts' (Hammersley, 1992:2). This manifests an underlying tension in ethnographic research between the 'naturalism characteristic of ethnographers' methodological thinking and the constructivism and cultural relativism that shape their understanding of the perspectives and behaviour of the people they study' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 11). The argument is that ethnographers use rhetorical devices to construct an account of their research. However, whilst not claiming 'triangulation', the variety of sources used shows the reader that there was a level of consistency between different sources of data.

Once the period of field research had ended I began organising the research data. The data was organised thematically using the three types of information collected, these being the narratives of activists, observations of events and daily activities and a variety of texts. I drew up 18 themes in the initial stages and these were narrowed down to four broader themes each linked to one of the research questions set out in



Chapter 2. The themes were: union internal practices linked to the first research question on participative democracy; issues surrounding membership, which relates to the second research question on building mass membership; workplace activism and representative roles, which relates to the third question on maintaining links with workers; and regional union identity and collective action, linked to the fourth question on developing and sustaining collective interests and identity. The evidence from these themes are presented in Chapters 4-8, with Chapter 4 integrating background data with observations to set the scene for the chapters to follow. A more detailed outline of the content and structure of Chapters 5-8 is presented at the end of Chapter 4. The final chapter reconsiders the findings in relation to the empirical research questions and links them to a broader analysis of the more theoretical questions on the nature of trade union renewal and revitalization.

## Chapter 4: Trade union organisation in the railways

### Introduction

This chapter explores the context of industrial relations in the French public railway company, the *Société nationale des chemins de fer* (SNCF) and explores in greater detail the context of the regional union of SUD-Rail which provides the locus for this research. The first section considers the broader context of industrial relations in the railway sector and the current composition of trade unions and the nature of worker representation. The remainder of the Chapter is dedicated to presenting the industrial relations environment in the regional union of SUD-Rail. The sections provide information on trade union membership, workplace representative support, biographies of the activists in the research and give details of some contextualising events that took place around the time of the research. This background information sets the scene and highlights important details for understanding the following narrative chapters.

### Industrial relations in the railway sector

The railway sector represents a traditional stronghold for trade unions and has been a sector with high levels of conflict. This is a common trait in railway sectors across Europe where industrial relations have tended to be amongst the most conflictual.



Chevandier (2002), in a history of strikes in the railway sector in France, relates the conflictual nature of the railway sector to the construction and defence of the ‘cheminot’ (railwayman, *sic*) identity. Chevandier argues that the important strike movements in the railways in 1986 and 1995 were above all about the importance of defending the ‘cheminot’ identity (2002: 336, 352).

**Figure 4.1 Chronology of industrial relations in the French railways**

|   |
|---|
| <b>1937:</b> SNCF created by merging several private companies to become a semi-public company  |
| <b>1963:</b> Decree stipulating that labour law in the SNCF was the jurisdiction of the Ministry for Transport  |
| <b>1983:</b> SNCF became a ‘Industrial and Commercial Government-owned Corporation (Etablissement public à caractère industriel et commercial – EPIC) with the aim of operating, upgrading and developing the French rail network in line with the principles of public service                                 |
| <b>1983:</b> SNCF comes under the regulations of the Labour Code, which led to the setting-up of Works Councils, a Central Works Council, Workplace Health and Safety Committees and Délégués du personnels.  |
| <b>December 1986 – January 1987:</b> Strikes over pay and new working conditions. The strikes mainly concerned the proposed changes towards merit-based pay for drivers. Strikes were characterised by non-union instigated action. The government abandoned the project of a new salary structure for drivers. |
| <b>1991:</b> EU Directive on the ‘development of community wide railways’, requiring the separation of rail infrastructure and operating activities   |
| <b>17 November 1995:</b> Reforms of social security and plan for the reorganisation of the SNCF announced by Juppé government   |
| <b>24 November 1995:</b> National day of action against government reforms. Nicole Notat, general secretary of the CFDT gives her support to government reforms   |
| <b>November-December 1995:</b> Strikes against pension reforms. Participation rates range from 160,000 on 30 November to 985,000 on 12 December   |

**10 December 1995:** Juppé renounces the change in retirement ages for railway workers, suspends the plan of reorganisation in the SNCF as well as the reform of the special salary regimes for public sector workers

**18 December 1995:** Strikes end in the SNCF

**9 January 1996:** Nicole Notat refuses an extraordinary congress of the CFDT.

**26 January 1996:** 700 trade union activists leave the CFDT to form SUD-Rail

**1997:** Creation of Réseau ferré de France (RFF) in line with 1991 EU Directive, to separate railway infrastructure from operating activities

**May 1998:** Nationwide strike over job creation and pay increases. List of demands also included reduction of working time, guarantees on the railways special social protection schemes, the abolition of the separation between the management of the rail infrastructure and that of operating activities (30-35 per cent participation)

**April-May 1999:** Strike by railway drivers on the of the 35-hour week negotiations

**June 1999:** Agreement on 35-hour week signed by CGT and CFDT, other unions rejected the agreement

**March-April 2001:** Strikes over pay increases, defending pension entitlements and against the restructuring of the SNCF around its passenger and freight activities. This was in the context of EU level moves to liberalise the rail sector, with major routes in trans-European freight to be opened up to competition in 2003

**October 2002:** French government decision to phase out the early retirement scheme for civil servants. In November this was passed by Parliament.

**January 2003:** Opening of government discussions on pension reforms

**1 February 2003:** Strike against pension reforms

**March 2003:** Strikes against the opening up of international freight transport by rail which came into effect on 13 March

**March 2003:** Consultation of trade unions over pensions reforms

**3 April 2003:** Strike against pension reforms

**7 May 2003:** Draft bill on pension reforms presented to the cabinet

**13 May 2003:** Strikes against pension reforms



|  |
|--|
| <p><b>14 May 2003:</b> Government proposes negotiations to amend pension reforms. Special schemes including the SNCF pension scheme were excluded from the reforms</p> |
|--|

Figure 4.1 highlights the major events in industrial relations in the railway sector. The industrial relations context in the railways in France has been characterised by growing insecurity from reforms driven by European Union policy and changes to the occupational status of workers to become more aligned to conditions in the private sector. In France the threat of privatisation and moves towards liberalisation are seen as challenges to the occupational status of railway workers. The threats of restructuring have been met with industrial action, which is couched in terms of insufficient pay rises and defence of pension entitlements. The trade unions argue against the customer-oriented culture now taking precedence over a public service-oriented culture.

The head of the SNCF, appointed by the government, is directly responsible to the minister of transport which means the government continues to be an important actor in industrial relations in the railway sector. In term of industrial relations in the SNCF, collective bargaining on most issues, including working time, wages and training is dealt with at national level. This sets the framework for regional and section negotiations with union representations. Centralised collective bargaining results in agreements that applied to all ‘cheminots’ and limited bargaining takes place at the local level. Industrial relations are regulated through collective agreements and labour law, and the organisation of representative institutions for negotiation, consultation and the handling of grievances are laid out in an extensive set of legislation in the Code du travail. Further discussion of the nature of collective

bargaining is beyond the scope of the thesis, and did not form an important part of the research, which is itself an indicator of the concern with and level of collective bargaining conducted at the local level.

The SNCF is organised into 23 regions, 5 of those being based in Paris and its outlying districts. There were around 170,000 employees working directly for the SNCF at the time of the research (Paccou, 2006). Employment levels have been reduced by 33.5 per cent between 1976 and 2000. The company had a total of 175,000 employees in 2000, which grew in 2001 to 176,500. However the levels fell after 2001 to below 170,000 in 2004. There are three levels of employees dependent on their job category or qualification level. The first category is 'exécution', which consists of operations workers. The 'drivers' are included in the category of 'exécution' and this therefore is not a category based only on skill level. Yet most workers at this level do not have any management or supervisory tasks. The second category is 'maîtrise' and consists of workers educated up to or beyond the 'baccalaureate', a qualification which could be considered equivalent to the UK's 'A' levels. The third category is 'cadre', which comprises of management level employees educated to 'baccalaureate plus 3', the equivalent of a university degree in the UK. Although most employees were on permanent contracts and had the status of 'cheminot', there were a number of workers employed as contract workers<sup>2</sup>. They were employed directly by the SNCF but had different terms and conditions to the 'cheminots'. This included workers employed under a government contract helping

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<sup>2</sup> One of three categories of public employee who do not possess established civil servant status. They work under a contract of employment parallel, as it were, to a private contract but subject to special rules (EMIRE).



young workers into the labour market ('emploi jeune')<sup>3</sup>. Another set of contract workers was the 'PS25'. A subset of these workers was Moroccan and had been directly employed by the SNCF since the 1970s to help build and maintain the railway lines. They were mostly men, aged from mid to late 50s and over, and had a different employment status to the 'cheminots'. One of the important differences in status is the age of retirement. PS25 workers retire at 65 whereas the 'cheminots' retire between the ages of 50 and 60, depending on the job category. In 2004 there were 670 PS25s left in the SNCF with the majority having already retired. There were around 25 PS25 workers in the region at the time of the research. Whilst they formed only a small proportion of workers at the research site, the PS25s are introduced here because a key activist, Jean-Paul, played a role in organising and mobilising this group of workers. Another important group of workers in the SNCF are those employed by the five *private* contract companies looking after cleaning. These companies bid every three/four years for contracts to clean trains and stations. It is difficult to get information on how many workers are employed by these companies and how many of them work in the different regions. There were cleaners based in all stations who were in charge of cleaning trains and looking after the station itself. There were also depots where large numbers of workers, most (if not all) minority ethnic workers, were employed to clean train interiors whilst they were stationed at the depot. For example, one of the largest depots in the region, which was on the outlying districts, employed 130 cleaners at any one time to clean trains at the depot.

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<sup>3</sup> There was no available information on the numbers of these workers in the region.

The sector represents one of the most important strongholds for trade union organisation in France. In the SNCF there are nine union organisations, five of the union federations being affiliated to one of the nationally representative union confederations, the CGT; the CFDT; the CFTC; the CFE-CGC; and FO. The remaining four, SUD-Rail, UNSA, FGAAC (Federation Generale Autonome des Agents de Conduite) and SNCS (Syndicat national des cadres supérieurs), have representative status in the SNCF, the SNCS among management staff only. The union FGAAC is occupationally specific and represents drivers, UNSA represents mainly management and administrative employees, and SUD-Rail represents workers from all sectors of activity. Trade union density is estimated at 30 percent in the SNCF, which is well above the national average of 8 per cent. The CGT has the highest membership density estimated at around 17 per cent.

**Table 4.1 SUD-Rail membership density 1996-2004**

| Year | No. of employees | Members | Percentage |
|------|------------------|---------|------------|
| 1996 | 175 798          | 2 084   | 1.18       |
| 1997 | 174 224          | 2 728   | 1.56       |
| 1998 | 173 427          | 3 114   | 1.79       |
| 1999 | 174 232          | 3 682   | 2.11       |
| 2000 | 174 863          | 4 606   | 2.63       |
| 2001 | 176 575          | 5 151   | 2.91       |
| 2002 | 175 510          | 5 463   | 3.11       |
| 2003 | 171 674          | 5 848   | 3.40       |
| 2004 | 168 300          | 7201    | 4.27       |

Source: Paccou (2006)



In 2000 SUD-Rail had an estimated national total of 4,606 members against the CGT and CFDT estimates of 31,000-32,000 and 18,000 respectively. In 2003, SUD-Rail's estimated membership was 5,848 against the CGT and the CFDT estimates of 35,000 and 9,000. However, it is difficult to rely on union membership figures, as unions are often accused of inflating figures, and outside estimates are unverifiable. It is also difficult to obtain information on the composition of union members. In a survey conducted in 1997 on the composition of members in SUD-Rail the average age of members is 40 and the majority are in operations and train drivers. In the different 'colleges' 85 percent of members are in operations, 12 percent in supervisory positions (*maîtrise*), and 3 percent in management. The majority, 66 percent were previously members of the CFDT, 23.6 percent were members of the CGT and 7.4 percent have never been union members. In terms of political engagement, 21 percent are members of left-wing parties (Socialist Party, the Greens, the LCR, LO or other anarchist parties) and 43 percent are members of an association, such as anti-globalisation or ecological movements (Paccou, 2006).

The five nationally representative confederations are structured by occupation into industrial federations and geographically within cross-industrial 'departmental unions'. The industrial federations organise workplace units called 'section syndicales' and the departmental unions organise 'local unions' in individual towns. SUD-Rail adopts a simpler structure being organised into 24 regional unions, five of which are in Paris and its surrounding areas. As the union operates on a federal structure there are no cross-industrial 'departmental union'. However, they are affiliated to the confederation Union Syndicale –Solidaires, which has geographically based offices. The federation executive plays a coordinating and an

organising role and implements decisions taken by regional unions in the federation council meetings. The number of mandates for the federation council depends on membership numbers, but in general there are two representatives per union participating in council meetings. The council meets at least five times in a year and is the principal decision making body. A congress is held every three years to define the general strategic direction of the union. The system of voting is the same for the council as for the congress – that of a 2/3 majority voting system. SUD-Rail has other rules for promoting internal democracy. Before any signature of agreement with management members need to be consulted. Also in negotiations with management, the SUD-Rail delegation must be composed of a majority of non-permanent officials, those still working in the organisation. The executive must produce a report of activity at every council meeting and proposes a plan for the distribution of hours amongst regional unions, which is ratified by the council. Trade union officials are limited to having two mandates of three years in the aim to rotate responsibilities in the union and to avoid a distancing of activists from the realities of the workplace (Paccou, 2006). The federation organises 14 national liaison committees which look after specific problems in different occupation or sectors of activity, for example, train drivers or cleaning. Members pay their dues directly to their regional union and a part of this fee is transferred to the federation level. Trade union members pay a fee in relation to their salary, which represents around 0.8 percent. The proportion to the federation is around 30 percent of the membership fee. Each trade union has the right to decide on the price of membership fees, but with the constraint that it must equal at least 0.75 percent of an employee's salary. The membership fee for SUD-Rail remains the lowest amongst the trade unions, with the CGT charging 1 percent of salaries.



The low level of membership means that unions rely on funds accrued from elected representative positions. In the SNCF workplace elections for the *délégués du personnels* (DP) and *comités d'entreprise* (CE) are held at the same time every two years. The role of DP was established in 1936 and is a person elected by all of the employees of an establishment (whether union members or not, and therefore not to be translated as "shop steward") to a recognized office which consists in presenting individual and collective grievances to management and bringing to the attention of the Labour Inspectorate any complaints or comments in connection with the regulations for whose enforcement the Inspectorate is responsible. A very recent Law invests the DP with the authority, in cases of infringement of the rights and freedoms of individuals, to request the employer to take corrective action and, should it then become necessary, to bring the matter before an Industrial Tribunal. Nowadays, this form of workforce representation is required by law in all enterprises or establishments with 10 or more employees. The regulations governing the election, functions, means of action and protection of these representatives date from 1946 and 1982 (EMIRE). The DP is the most widespread form of employee representation in France. However, the powers and responsibilities are limited in comparison with those of the works councils and trade union representatives (EMIRE). In the SNCF elected DPs have meetings with management at the section level every 2 months. The elected positions provided a way of accessing resources for time with workers enables DPs to maintain links with the workplace in dealing with workers' individual grievances.

Works councils have been compulsory in enterprises with more than 50 employees since 1945. Possessing a legal personality, the works council in France is a collegiate body composed not only of employee members elected by the workforce but also of the head of the enterprise (who chairs the council and takes part in certain votes) and of representatives appointed by the trade unions (who act in a purely consultative capacity). Its position in the enterprise is singular: it has charge of company welfare and cultural facilities. The law invests it with only consultative powers in regard to employer initiatives concerning the organization and management of the enterprise. Other than in the case of profit-sharing agreements, it possesses no formal bargaining power. In practice, the dividing line between consultation, which is the prerogative of the works council, and collective bargaining, which is the prerogative of the representative trade unions, is a very fine one. Numerous agreements, formal or otherwise, are concluded between the head of an enterprise and the works council, and the courts accord these a certain legal force, at the least as unilateral undertakings on the part of the employer. The institution is a complex one. It is a counterweight to managerial prerogatives, yet also enables their exercise to be rationalized. It is a complement to union power, yet is also virtually its competitor (EMIRE). The CE role has been reinforced over the years through a widening of the issues for compulsory consultation, a right to contact experts and a budget for running the works council, which forms 0.2 % of the wage bill of the company.



**Table 4.2 Economic and social roles of the works council**

| Economic role  | Social role    |
|--|----------------|
| Reorganisation   | Canteens       |
| Budget   | Leisure centre |
| Training   | Libraries      |
| In-house doctor  | Sports centres |
| Important projects   | Holidays       |
| Assessment of hygiene, security and conditions of work and planning for the region |                |
| Housing  |                |

Source: Regional union information

In the SNCF, the works council organises several committees to fulfil their role. The committees for training and housing are compulsory as set out in the Labour Code. Other committees are those for social activities, health and safety, information, budget, leisure, sports and catering. Works council representatives also have a social role running canteens, libraries and sports and holiday centres for employees.

A third workplace institution is the health and safety representative (CHSCT), which gives union activists access to time resources in addition to those for CE representatives and DPs. The number of CHSCT representatives for each union is determined by the results of elections for the two main representative institutions. Prior to 1982 it formed part of the works council; since 1982 it has been a separately constituted body, with the purpose of helping to protect employees' health and safety at work and to improve working conditions. Compulsory in enterprises with more than 50 employees, it is composed of the head of the enterprise and employee

members appointed by a special body comprising elected representatives of the workforce. It has special means of access to information and it may take certain initiatives (such as the right to issue a notification of danger) without, however, possessing the authority to halt production, and performs a major consultative role (EMIRE).

**Table 4.3 Time resources from elected positions**

| Representative         | Days allocated                  |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| DP                     | 2 days per month (15 hrs)       |
| CE representative      | 2 ½ days per month (20 hrs)     |
| CHCST representative   | 1 ½ days per month* (10-12 hrs) |
| Grading representative | 7 days per year (56 hrs)        |

\*Under certain circumstances the Law states that the CHCST representative can use as many hours as is required for maintaining health and safety.

The legal requirements for hours for all the elected roles are shown in table 4.4 below. Health and safety representatives meet with *sectional* management every 3 months to discuss issues related to health and safety in the workplace. The other representatives at the workplace level were the representatives meeting management on an annual basis to discuss employees’ grading levels (*notation*) – known as the grading negotiations. The number of grading representatives was allocated as a percentage of workplace representative election results.

In the SNCF, the elections for the CE are used as a more important indicator for union support than the elections for DPs. For DP elections, workers tend to vote for particular individuals rather than unions as the elections take place at the section



level and candidates are likely to know the majority of workers. The CE elections take place at the regional level where candidates are less likely to know the majority of workers and they are more likely to vote for a union (Paccou, 2006). The CGT has dominated workplace representative elections in the SNCF since the Second World War gaining more than 60 percent of votes up until 1967. From 1967 the CGT’s support declined, falling to 41.9 percent in 1992. The CFDT soon became the second union organisation in the sector after its creation in 1964 and by 1992 the organisation had 29 percent of the votes. In 1994 the CFDT support declined to 27.7 percent and in 1996, after the arrival of SUD-Rail, support fell to 20 percent. The CGT remains by far the most important organisation in terms of support.

**Table 4.4 Representative election results in the railways 1996-2004**

|      | CGT  | CFDT  | SUD-Rail |
|------|------|-------|----------|
| 1996 | 46.5 | 20.6  | 5.3      |
| 1998 | 45.8 | 19.6  | 8.7      |
| 2000 | 39   | 18.75 | 12.7     |
| 2002 | 39   | 18.75 | 12.7     |
| 2004 | 44   | 9     | 15.5     |

Source: Paccou (2006)

In 2000 SUD-Rail became the third union organisation in the railways, its success attributed to its radical position in the conflict over working time. The CGT and the CFDT suffered declines in support over this conflict having signed the agreement which was not supported by the majority of railway workers. In 2002 the unions maintained the same levels of support as in 2000, a situation that is attributed to a

period of calm in the sector. However, in the election of 2004, which occurred during the period of research, the composition of trade union changed significantly, with SUD-Rail becoming the second trade union organisation in the SNCF. This election occurred after the conflict over pension reforms in 2003, where the CFDT lost popularity with workers having supported reforms. The CGT was the main beneficiary of the decline in support for the CFDT increasing its votes by 5 percent and confirming its position as the majority union in the SNCF.

**Table 4.5 SUD-Rail election support 1996-2004**

|    | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 |
|----|------|------|------|------|------|
| CE | 5.3  | 8.6  | 12.7 | 12.7 | 15.5 |
| DP |      | 6.5  | 10.7 | 11.1 | 14.8 |

Source: Paccou (2006)

Support for SUD-Rail is concentrated in the Paris regions of the SNCF, and is particularly strong in the two regions who the founded the union SUD-Rail. The research was carried out in one of these regions, and is presented in detail in the remainder of this chapter.

**Regional level industrial relations and union organisation**

The research was carried out in one of the Paris regions of the SNCF. The region of research is one of the smallest in Paris, but the second most important in Europe in terms of traffic and passengers. There are 97 stations in the region, with over 810 kilometres of tracks, which serve stations in the northwest of Paris. The region has



around 350,000 passengers per day and 1866 freight and passenger trains. Around 85 per cent of passengers live in the outskirts of Paris. In the region of research there were 6,748 workers directly employed by the SNCF. The employees were split into the following workplace sections and depots.

**Table 4.6 Employee breakdown and union members in the region**

| Workplace sections/depots                             | No of employees | Union Members |
|---|-----------------|---------------|
| Customer service and operations (in-station services) |                 |               |
| Central Paris   | 977             | 82            |
| Outlying districts                                    | 1683            | 292           |
| Operations (on-train guards/conductors)               |                 |               |
| Central Paris   | 493             | 10            |
| Drivers and maintenance (rolling stock)               |                 |               |
| Central Paris   | 681             | 62            |
| Outlying districts                                    | 928             | 59            |
| Maintenance   |                 |               |
| Central Paris   | 510             | 73            |
| Outlying districts                                    | 390             | 29            |
| Building maintenance                                  | 242             | 10            |
| Head office   |                 |               |
| Admin and Management                                  | 666             | 47            |
| (Plus security employees)                             | 178             |               |
| Cleaning  | Not available   | 159           |
| CE canteen workers                                    | Not available   | 8             |
| Retired workers                                       | Not available   | 33            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>6748</b>     | <b>864</b>    |

Source: SNCF and regional union documents

Customer service and operations employees are divided into two sections based on their geographical location. Employees from this section are in charge of ticket sales, other customer services, and assuring the circulation of freight and passenger trains. This forms the largest section of workers in the region. The on-train employees consist of conductors and guards taking care of passenger services, checking tickets and ensuring security on board the train. The train drivers and maintenance workers are also split geographically into two depots and are in charge of driving and maintaining rolling stock. The maintenance sections are in charge of track maintenance, the up-keep of buildings and electrics and communication installations. The split of operations, supervisory and management employees was 70 per cent, 20 per cent and 10 per cent respectively in the region.

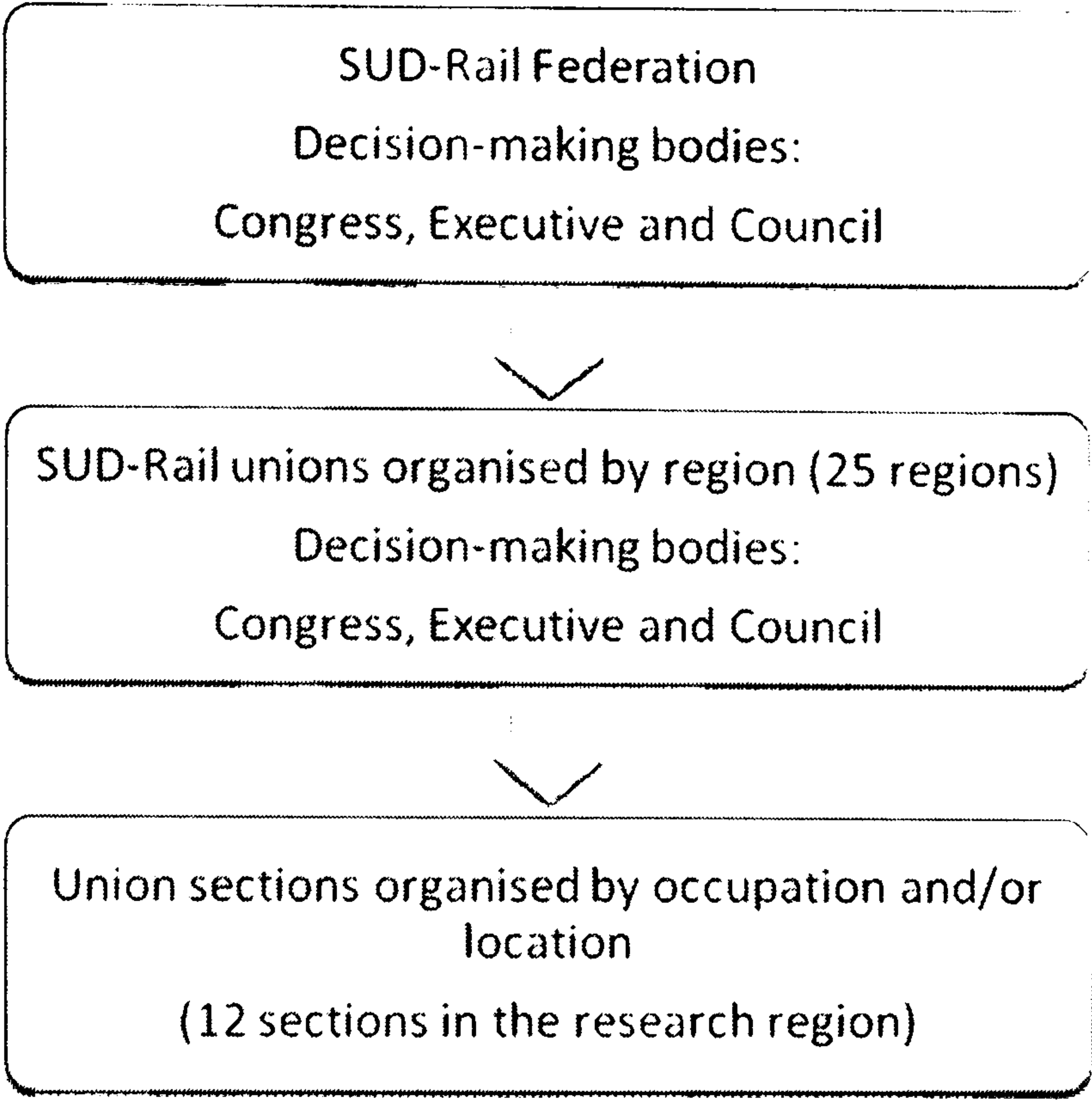
**Table 4.7 Union members in the regional union 1996-2004**

|                | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Members</b> | 494  | 544  | 578  | 604  | 710  | 800  | 848  | 886  | 888  |

Paccou (2006)



**Figure 4.2 Structure of union organisation in SUD-Rail**



The regional union organised workers into 12 union sections, 9 of which roughly follow the workplace and employee breakdown in table 4.6 but with two separate sections representing management and administrative employees. The remaining union sections were privatised cleaning workers and retired workers. The 12 union sections join together to make up the regional union of SUD-Rail. According to regional union documents, SUD-Rail had 888 members across all sections in 2003, which represents a membership density of around 10 percent. The figures show the possible variation in membership density across different sections of the local workforce. However, this membership figure should be treated with caution, as it includes retired members and workers who had agreed to become members but had not yet paid fees. The density figure also includes members from the privatised cleaning companies, who formed the second largest group of unionised workers in

the region but they are not included in the breakdown of workers in table 4.6<sup>4</sup>. The number of cleaning workers in the region was unknown and is not included in the breakdown of employee numbers in the region. Thus the percentage of members overall is difficult to measure. Nevertheless SUD-Rail membership density in the region was higher than the 3.5 per cent at national level<sup>5</sup>. The sections with the highest number of members were in customer services and operations in outlying districts, followed by the cleaning companies' section. The lowest membership density was in the train conductors' section and in building maintenance. It was commonly acknowledged in the regional union that the CFDT dominated representation amongst train conductors.

The elections for CE and DP representatives were held in March 2004 during the period of research. In the region overall, SUD-Rail had a support of around 30 per cent, second only to the CGT, who had around 45 per cent of the vote. The support for SUD-Rail in the region was much higher than the national figure and highlights the importance of taking into account regional variation in support for unions. It is important to note that the unions monopolised representative positions in this region and in the SNCF in general. The table below shows the evolution of support for SUD-Rail in the region for the elections of the DPs and CE representatives.

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<sup>4</sup> The members for the cleaning companies were also exaggerated. Sylvestre was trying to gain representative status in one of the 5 cleaning companies and had asked workers to sign a form saying they were members in order to help the case for representative status in the company. I followed the process involved in trying to gain represent in the cleaning company (which failed) as part of the research, but these observations are outside the scope of the thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Estimated membership for the CGT, the most organised and supported union in the region overall, was between 1000 and 1500 members.



**Table 4.8 Workplace elections results for the regional union**

|           | 1996 | 1998 | 2000 | 2002 | 2004 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>CE</b> | 28.5 | 27.8 | 32.2 | 29.5 | 28.1 |
| <b>DP</b> |      | 27.0 | 33.2 | 29.5 | 27.7 |

Source: Paccou (2006)

The results show a peak in support for the regional union in 2000 with 32.2 per cent and a decline in 2002 and 2004. There were variations in support amongst groups of workers and between workplaces. Workers voted for candidates in their category (college), whether it was operations (exécution), supervisory (maîtrise) or management (cadre). Whilst the CGT was dominant overall in the region, there were workplaces where SUD-Rail and other unions gained a majority. It is interesting to note that the results differed for délégués du personnel and works council representatives within the same workplaces and that there were strongholds for some unions within certain categories. For example, the CFDT was the majority union in most categories for train conductors but on a general level it had much less support than SUD-Rail and the CGT. UNSA had a stronghold within management grades and FGAAC was an important union for drivers.

The CGT and SUD-Rail dominated workplace representative positions in the region with only one other union present on the works council, UNSA, representing mainly management employees. The CFDT was formerly an important union in the region, but after the creation of SUD-Rail in 1996, and progressive internal disagreements leading to more activists leaving in 2003, they were gradually losing support and elected positions. The participation rates were over 70 per cent for the workplace elections in 2004 and, whilst this had declined slightly from previous years, it

demonstrated that the elections were regarded as important to most workers. The elections for *délégués du personnel* provided the union with the possibility of securing a larger number of positions, but the works council was generally viewed as wielding more power for the unions. The union with the most seats on the works council controlled a budget representing 0.2 per cent of the gross wage bill in the region. This was for the functioning of the works council. Representatives also managed a budget for social activities representing 1.72 per cent of the wage bill and were responsible for managing SNCF staff canteens, which meant that the council employed and managed workers.

Table 4.9 below shows the election support and the number of elected representatives in each of the union sections. In the region, there were 12 seats on the works council and 114 DP positions. The number of seats held by each union had a considerable influence on the orientation of the body, with decisions passed by majority voting. The workforce also voted for a deputy for each seat on the works council and for each *délégué du personnel*. In 2002, the regional union gained four seats on the works council out of the 12, and 32 elected *délégués du personnel* out of the 114, second only to the CGT who held 7 and 56 respectively.



**Table 4.9 SUD-Rail election results by section and number of elected representatives**

| Sections                                  | % support<br>2002 | % support<br>2004 | No of elected reps. in<br>2002 *        |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|---|
| Customer service and operations           |                   |                   |   |
| Central Paris                             | 35                | 30                | 14                                      |
| Outlying districts                        | 42                | 44                | 27                                      |
| Operations (on-train conductors)          |                   |                   |   |
| Central Paris                             | 8                 | 7                 | 0                                       |
| Driver and maintenance (rolling<br>stock) | 24                | 19                | 7                                       |
| Central Paris                             | 21                | 19                | 7                                       |
| Outlying districts                        |                   |                   |   |
| Maintenance                               |                   |                   |   |
| Central Paris                             | 33.5              | 37                | 8                                       |
| Outlying districts                        | 41                | 30                | 12                                      |
| Building maintenance                      | 23                | 21                | 1                                       |
| Admin and management                      | 37                | 37                | 12                                      |
| Cleaning                                  | 44                | 44                |   |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>29.5</b>       | <b>28.1</b>       | <b>88 (32 DPs in 2002, 29<br/>2004)</b> |

\* Includes DPs, works council and health and safety representatives and grading representatives

During the period of research the regional union lost a seat on the works council to the CGT in the elections in March 2004, and the CGT increased its majority from 7 to 8 seats. The remaining seat was held by UNSA, a union representing mainly management and administrative employees. For each position there was also a substitute, meaning that SUD-Rail held a total of 6 CE representative positions.

Elected representative were entitled to twenty hours a month for conducting CE activities. This time could be split with substitutes. SUD-Rail had 40 health and safety representatives from all sections in the region.

### **The regional union office and activists' profiles**

The union office for SUD-Rail was based near the largest mainline station in the region. The mainline station held regional management offices and offices for the other representative unions in the region. SUD-Rail was based in a separate building outside the main station. The regional management designated this building for representative unions in the region, as there was insufficient office space for the eight unions in the original building. This was due in part to the arrival of SUD-Rail in 1996, which became the eighth representative union in the region. Management had a legal requirement to provide space for each of the representative unions. Sylvestre said that the other unions were sceptical about using this building as it was separate from the station and would mean less contact with members and workers, as they would have to make a special effort to come to the union rather than just passing through when at work. Nevertheless, the regional union of SUD-Rail took up the opportunity to use the building, which had a large regional office, separate from the other unions. This provided them with more facilities than the other unions. It also meant they were able to run the union more independently, as they were not using shared facilities<sup>6</sup>. Facilities at the regional union office included three meeting rooms, two separate offices, and a computer room, with four computers, a

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<sup>6</sup> Other unions had official access to the building as it was shared, but they did not use the facilities during the time of the research.



photocopier and printer. There were supplies of printing materials, which were used to produce regional union documents, reports from meetings, election propaganda and tracts.

There were two decision-making bodies that oversaw the running of the regional union, the regional executive (*le bureau regional*) and the regional council (*le conseil regional*). There was also a general assembly held once a year and the regional union congress, which took place every three years<sup>7</sup>. The executive was made up of the secretary, the treasurer, and activists from each union section and other activists considered important for the running of the union. The regional union executive met every two weeks to discuss issues such as the running of the regional union, planned actions or demonstrations and any issues arising from the federation level and management. They also discussed issues concerning other social movement organisations including calls for joint actions. The regional council was composed of a mandated number of activists from each union branch. There were around twenty-five activists who took part in the regional council and the main role was to ratify decisions made by the executive. Other meetings taking place in the regional union office were union section meetings and there was also training days offered by the union on being a new member and on representative positions, including *délégué du personnel* (DP), health and safety (CHSCT) and grading. Additional activities that took place at the union included the writing of the union regional paper, regional and section tracts. There were regular activities to prepare for or report from meaning the regional union office was frequently busy. The busiest period of the year was February and March time where once every two years there were workplace

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<sup>7</sup> I did not participate a general assembly during my field research.

elections, and every year there were grading negotiations which involved activists mailing each employee in their workplace to let them know if they had moved job grades. Sylvestre said this was a 'service' that was carried out only by SUD-Rail and was introduced to show that the union had something to offer workers and to set them apart from the other unions. This involved a great deal of resources for the activists as they aimed to cover the whole workforce and to encourage them to put in a complaint if they had not moved grade levels.

The regional union also offered a legal information service for members, although the activists allowed non-members to use the service. Sylvestre, Patrick, David and Hisham ran the service. Patrick was an industrial tribunal judge and had undertaken training in labour law as part of this role. He had time designated for this role and as he was a DP and a CHSCT representative he had at his disposal enough hours on union duty to cover his daily working week. Although he was not an appointed permanent official, he was on union duty nearly full-time, much of which was spent on legal activities. Sylvestre was being trained to stand for election for industrial tribunal judge. He was also heavily active in the union being on the executive board and being in charge of activities in the cleaning branch, whilst not being an employee in the section himself. The legal information service was normally held one morning a week when workers could come to the regional union office to have letters written for them and to get advice on whether to take issues to an industrial tribunal. It was predominantly the privately employed cleaning workers who made use of this service as they had more problems with their employment contracts, being part of the less regulated private sector. The activists in charge said that workers in this section were



less likely to understand and be able to respond to their employer, not being able to read and write French.

There were three permanent officials working at any one time in the regional union. Firstly, there was Jacques, the regional union secretary. He had a three-year mandate as of 2001 and acted as the main spokesperson for the regional union at the federation level. Additional activities included preparing for and chairing regional union executive and council meetings and overseeing the general administration of the regional union office. There were two other permanent activists in the union who alternated every month. Usually these activists volunteered to take up the positions or were selected and asked by the executive. For each union section outlined above there was a section leader. The majority of section leaders were involved in regional union activities and would often take up the role of the monthly permanent activist. Their role was to help with running the regional office. Christophe, the regional union treasurer, was also frequently at the regional union. Although it was not a permanent position, he was allocated at least one day a week by the union to carry out this role. The treasurer compiled and reported on financial issues in the regional union office, alongside helping with the administration and organisation of its activities.

### **Figure 4.3 Biographies of activists**

#### *SUD-Rail activists from other regions*

**Sophie** (white female, early forties): Sophie had worked in mainline station ticket office for 17 years and was an activist for the CFDT for 9 years before she left to join SUD-Rail when the union was formed in 1996. She was elected onto the SNCF company level works council in 2003 (the first year

SUD-Rail were allowed to stand). She worked part-time (2 days per week) doing back office administration for the SNCF and 3 days on trade union and representative duties.

**Franck** (white male, mid forties): Franck had worked for the SNCF for 26 years. He was a manager (cadre) administering train station maintenance for a large Paris region. He has been a trade union member for 23 years. He left the CFDT in 1996 and was one of the militants who formed SUD-Rail. He was a permanent official for CFDT before leaving to join SUD-Rail. He had been on the federation executive for 6 years, until 2002, after when he had stepped down to concentrate on regional union activities.

### *Regional union activists*

#### Regional executive members:

**George** (white male, mid forties): George had been in the SNCF for 25 years, worked in signalling and was at 'maîtrise' level. He joined the CFDT soon after joining the SNCF. George had been with SUD-Rail since its creation in 1996 and was the regional union secretary for 3 years previous to secretary in place at the time of the research. In the union he held a position on the regional executive and the regional council. In his workplace section he held a position on the grading committee and had previously been a 'délégué du personnel' (DP), a works council (CE) and health and safety representative (CHSCT). He was heavily involved in the union and was to be found at the regional union most days. He was responsible for organising training for the DP. He was described as being very committed to the union by other activists. He was also known for sanctioning other activists for not carrying out their duties well.

**Jacques** (white male, mid thirties): Jacques had been the regional union secretary for 3 years and was voted in to continue the position at the regional congress of October 2004. His workplace section was track maintenance on the outskirts of Paris and he was at operations level. He was discharged from work full-time to be the regional union secretary. He had a position on the regional executive and the regional council. He was also on the federation level council. He was involved in other social



movements' activities, like ATTAC<sup>8</sup> (he attended the summer school for the organisation). Jacques was a representative on the regional works council.

**Jean-Paul** (white male, late forties): Jean-Paul worked in signalling in one of the larger stations in central Paris and was at 'maîtrise' level. He had been involved in unions for around 20 years and was previously a full-time official within both the CGT and the CFDT. He was part of the movement to create SUD-Rail and held a full-time position at the federation level. He also held a position on the regional council and on the executive after being voted in at a regional council meeting in February 2004. After a disagreement with the other federation members, on the integration of ex-CFDT members onto the federation executive, Jean-Paul and the other federation representative from the regional union withdrew their involvement in the federation executive. He was a political activist for *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* (LCR). In the union he was responsible for training on health and safety. He was also responsible for organising the foreign contract workers (PS25s). He also held a position on the works council.

**Benjamin** (white male, early forties): Benjamin had been in the SNCF for 20 years. He was not a member of a union before joining SUD-Rail in 1996. He worked as a train driver and was based in the main station in the region. His grade was operations but as a driver this has a different status to other operations grade. He was a member of the national job-specific committee for drivers in SUD-

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<sup>8</sup> Union syndicale-Solidaires was on the founding committee of ATTAC. 'Attac was founded in 1998 and its first concrete proposal was the taxation of financial transactions in order to create a development fund and to help curb stock market speculation. This is what gave ATTAC its name: the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens. Today, the ATTAC network is present in many countries and is active on a wide range of issues: the WTO and international financial institutions, debt, taxation of financial transactions, tax havens, public services, water, free-trade zones (Mediterranean, American, European etc.). In each country, the association has groups working on various themes. All of these groups are involved in national and international campaigns whose aim is to propose concrete alternatives to neoliberal orthodoxy, based on solidarity. To this end, signatories propose to participate or to cooperate with the international movement ATTAC to debate, produce and disseminate information, and act together, in their respective countries as well as on the continental and international levels. This joint actions have the following goals: to hamper international speculation; to tax income on capital; to penalize tax havens; to prevent the generalization of pension funds; to promote transparency in investments in dependant countries; to establish a legal framework for banking and financial operations, in order not to penalize further consumers and citizens; the employees of banking institutions can play an important role in overseeing these operations; to support the demand for the general annulment of the public debt of dependent countries, and the use of the resources thus freed in behalf of populations and sustainable development, which many call paying off the "social and ecological debt."

More generally, the goals are: to reconquer space lost by democracy to the sphere of finance; to oppose any new abandonment of national sovereignty on the pretext of the "rights" of investors and merchants; to create a democratic space at the global level. It is simply a question of taking back, together, the future of our world' (source: ATTAC website)



**Rail.** He also held a position on the regional executive and the regional council. During the research he had stopped attending regional executive meetings after disagreements with Jean-Paul on the functioning of the union. He was the leader of his workplace union section and held a position on the works council. In the union he was responsible for taking new member training.

**Eric** (white male, mid forties): Eric worked as a train driver based in the main station in the region. He had been part of SUD-Rail since 1996. As with Benjamin he was part of the national job-specific committee for drivers in SUD-Rail. He also held a position on the regional executive and the regional council. During the research he had stopped attending regional executive meetings after disagreements with Jean-Paul on the functioning of the union.

**Louis** (white male, late fifties): Louis had been in the SNCF for over 30 years. He worked in track maintenance and was at operations level. He was part of the movement to create SUD-Rail in 1996 and previously held full-time official positions in the CFDT. After the creation of SUD-Rail he held a position on the federation level executive. He and Jean-Paul were involved in a disagreement at the federation level where both stood down from the federation executive and refused to have further involvement in the federation until the issues were resolved. The issues involved the integration of ex-CFDT activists at the federation, which Louis disagreed with and the general comportment of the federation executive. In the union he held a position on the executive and the regional council. In the workplace he had been a member of the works council and both a personnel and health and safety representative.

**Benoit** (white male, early forties): Benoit worked in traffic control at a station on the outskirts of Paris and was at 'maîtrise' level. He had been in SUD-Rail since its creation in 1996. He was the leader for his workplace union section and held positions on the grading committee and was a personnel representative. In the union he was on the executive committee and the regional council and was involved in training for personnel representatives and new members. He was asked by the executive to become the union treasurer after the retirement of Christophe in June 2004. The regional council accepted the nomination. He described himself as being on the right of politics in SUD-Rail. Other activists joked with him about this and said that having two Mercedes and a motorbike was not the norm for a trade unionist.

**Marie** (white female, late thirties): Marie worked in a ticket office in a large station just outside Paris and was at operations level. She had been a member of SUD-Rail since its creation in 1996 and was a



member of the CFDT before SUD-Rail. She was the only woman to hold a position on the executive and she was also in the regional council. She nominated herself for the post of treasurer after the retirement of Christophe, but the executive decided that she would not be appropriate for the post. In the workplace she was a health and safety representative and a personnel delegate. She was heavily involved in her workplace section and often carried out union duties with Benoit. (At the regional union congress in October 2004 she did not put her name forward to continue in the executive.)

**David** (white male, early fifties): David worked in track maintenance on the outskirts of Paris and was at operations level. He had been in SUD-Rail since its creation and was previously a member of the CFDT. In the union he held a position on the executive and the regional council. He was also one of four involved in organising the legal service offered by the regional union. In the workplace he was leader of his union section and had been a personnel and health and safety representative.

**Gilles** (white male, late forties): Gilles worked in track maintenance on the outskirts of the main station. He had been involved in the CFDT before leaving to join SUD-Rail in 1996. He was at the 'maîtrise' level and was a DP. He held a position on the executive and the regional council.

**Sylvestre** (white male, late forties): Sylvestre had worked in the SNCF for 15 years. He worked as reserve employee replacing station workers in traffic control. He was at operations level. He had been with SUD-Rail since 2000, for four years at the time of research. He had previously been a member of the CGT, but was not involved in a representative capacity. He was convinced to join SUD-Rail by George and Jean-Paul when they told him he could have much more involvement in the union movement by joining SUD-Rail. He was involved in other social movements, notably environmental movements. He described himself as an anarchist. At the workplace level he was not a representative but was the works council representative for the cleaning union section at regional level and acted as one of the leaders of this section, alongside Abdul (see below). In the union he held a position on the executive and the regional committee and he was also one of the four representatives in charge of the legal service offered by the union. At the time of research he was requesting training to become an employee tribunal judge.

**Christophe** (white male, late fifties): Christophe worked in a management position (cadre) for the customer service and operations section and worked in the SNCF for over 30 years. He had been the union treasurer for the previous 6 years and was giving up the position on his retirement in June 2004. He was on the union executive and the regional union council.

**Alain** (white male, late forties): Alain worked as a station controller and had been a part of the union movement since he joined the SNCF after leaving school. He held a position of the union executive and the council.

**Olivier** (white male, early forties): Olivier had worked in the SNCF for around 20 years. He held a position on the regional union executive and the council. He was the leader of his union section.

**Philippe** (white male, early forties): Philippe had worked in the SNCF since leaving University and was at 'cadre' level in an administrative section. He was the union leader of his section and was also heavily involved in activities at the federation level. He was activist in LCR. It was this that other activists argued led to tensions between Philippe and Jean-Paul. He was an executive and a council member, but was very infrequently present in the meetings. On occasion when he was present there was often increased tension between the activists in the meeting and particularly between Philippe, Jean-Paul, Louis and Christophe.

Other regional union activists:

**Elodie** (white female, mid thirties): Elodie worked in a ticket office and had been a member of SUD-Rail since 1996. She was a DP and was a member of the regional council.

**Christine** (white female, early thirties): Christine worked as a station controller in the outlying districts. She had been a member of SUD-Rail since 1999 and was previously a member of the CFDT. She was a DP and a member of the regional council.

**Hisham** (Arab male, mid-forties): Hisham worked in one of the private sector cleaning companies in the region. He was a DS and a DP.

**Fathi** (Arab male, late forties): Fathi worked in the maintenance of buildings at operations level. He was a DP and a member of the regional council.

**Patrick** (white male, early forties): Patrick worked in track maintenance. He spent the majority of his time either on representative duty or on union activity. He helped run the legal service based at the union and was also an industrial tribunal judge<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> First-instance labour court, of long-established tradition, whose unique feature is its strictly joint composition, with half of its members (judges) elected by employees and half by employers. It has exclusive competence for dealing with individual disputes arising from the contract of employment. The way in which the Industrial Tribunals function follows rules which justify their composition. All



**Didier** (white male, mid forties): Didier worked as a circulation controller. He was a DP for his section.

**Stephane** (white male, late twenties): Stephane worked in a ticket office. He was standing for CHSCT representative.

**Gerard** (white male, late forties): Gerard worked as a reserve in the ticket offices. He was a DP.

**Gaëlle** (white female, early twenties): Gaëlle worked in a ticket office. She stood for election as a DP in March 2004. Her parents were members of the CGT. She had been a member of SUD for around 2 years.

**Helene** (white female, early thirties): Helene worked in a ticket office. She was a member of the regional council.

**Pascal** (white male, early twenties): Pascal worked in a ticket office. He had joined the SNCF to work in track maintenance but after taking entrance exams he was allocated to work in the commercial section. He had been a member of SUD-Rail for a year and had been put forward to be a health and safety representative for the upcoming elections. He had been a member of the CFTC in his previous workplace is the SNCF.

**Viviane** (white female, mid forties): Viviane worked in a ticket office. She held a position as a DP and was on the regional council.

**Henri** (white male, mid forties): Henri worked as a train conductor. He had recently become a member of SUD-Rail, and was looking to build up a union section amongst the train conductors, which was a CDFT dominated occupation in the region. He did not hold any elected positions, but was a member of the regional union council.

**Pierre** (white male, mid forties): Pierre worked in track maintenance and was one of the activists who stepped down from the federation executive alongside Louis and Jean-Paul. He had been a member of SUD-Rail since its creation. He was a member of the regional union council and had been involved in the setting up of the legal service offered by the regional union.

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disputes must, as a matter of principle, be the subject of an initial conciliation stage (before a joint conciliation board). In this stage the procedure is oral; the parties need not necessarily be assisted or represented by a lawyer, but they must appear in person. But the Tribunals are courts in the true sense. Their members ("prud'hommes") possess a status which protects them against the risk of pressure or sanction. Appeals against their rulings may be brought before the Courts of Appeal and before the Supreme Court. Although frequently criticized, the Industrial Tribunals are strongly supported both by many employers and by the trade unions (EMIRE).

**Michel** (white male, early forties): Michel worked in track maintenance and replaced Louis on the regional union executive towards the end of the research. He was a DP and a member of the regional council. He had been a member of SUD-Rail since its creation.

There were two activists on the executive who were from management grades (Christophe and Phillipe); four from supervisory grades (George, Jean-Paul, Gilles, Benoit) and the remaining activists were from operations grades (Frederic, Benjamin, Eric, Louis, Marie, David, Sylvestre, Alain and Olivier)<sup>10</sup>. The activists' profiles show that out of the 30 main activists the majority (23) were male and over 40, mainly white, with two ethnic (Arab) minority activists. The female activists tended to be younger, with only two over the age of 40. The regional executive members had considerable trade union and employment experience, covering most of the work force areas, from management (cadre) positions through signalling, station control' track control and maintenance, train driving to ticket offices. As presented in Chapter 2 Andolfatto and Labbé (2000) set the profile of a union member as male, middle-aged and working in the public sector. The composition of activists in the regional union reflects this dominant profile of union members. However, the composition was not entirely male dominated and young female activists played a role in the decision-making bodies of the union. There was a diversity of orientations and motivations for activism amongst the regional union activists. Some activists were having their first experience of unionism (Benjamin, Christine) as until SUD-Rail was created they saw unions, such as the CGT and the CFDT, as

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<sup>10</sup> This grading system does not apply to train drivers, as whilst they are considered as operation level workers they have different pay and conditions, which are better than the majority of workers at operations level. There were only a few activists working as train drivers and they tended to be concentrated in the central Paris region where the union had managed to build up support and called this a SUD-Rail stronghold.



centralised and bureaucratic organisations and generally concerned to further their ideological positions rather than the interest of workers. Many of the activists came from families who had been railway workers and had their first experiences of trade unionism through their family. Gaëlle's father was a lorry driver and all her family were active within the CGT. She said they understood her choice to be with SUD-Rail, and that it was only because there was no 'SUD' union in their place of work that they remained with the CGT. Didier's father and grandfather worked in the SNCF, and both were members of the CGT. He had seen how the CGT functioned when he was a child and had experienced how communist influences affected the running of the union. He was sent to Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries to stay with families because of his father's involvement in the CGT. He said that even at a young age he was aware that '*there was something that was not right about communism*'. He said that he stayed with rich families but saw that there were poor families around him. He stated that he disagreed with the ideological influences within the CGT and joined the CFDT after joining the railways, and then SUD-Rail once it was established in 1996. Members of the executive had diverse motivations for being in the railways and for being in SUD-Rail. Sylvestre had no family in the SNCF but chose a job in the railways as he thought public transport was important for the environment. He described himself as an ecologist and an anarchist, and the fact that he was an anarchist was one of his reasons for choosing SUD-Rail. He had been with the CGT until 2000 but was convinced by Jean-Paul and George that his ideas were more suited to SUD-Rail. The political backgrounds of the activists varied from having none at all to belonging to and being active in anarchist and radical workers parties. Jean-Paul and Philippe were both activists of LCR, a radical workers' party. The activists did not openly talk about their political

activities but within the SUD movement there are strong links to the LCR with the head of the political party being a member of SUD-PTT.

### **Contextualising the research**

There are three significant events which provide the context to this research. It is important to discuss these events from a methodological perspective as they demonstrate a heightened salience of certain issues at the time of the research. Firstly, the research was conducted during a workplace election year. During January, February and March every two years, the regional union's central activity is the preparation for the workplace elections. In 2004, the process began in mid-February when management posted a general notice for the elections. From mid-February, there were negotiations between management and unions on the regional protocol of the elections and from the beginning of March declarations of perspective candidates were accepted. This was followed by notification of relief candidates by mid-March. Postal ballots were sent out in mid-March and the electoral lists were officially posted by the 18 March. Ballots were given out to workers no later than the 24 March and the elections were held on 25 March. There were strict guidelines for the workplace elections, including who was eligible to stand as a candidate and who was eligible to vote. The protocols were distributed to the different unions and to candidates. In SUD-Rail training was organised for candidates and the substitutes for the role, which is discussed further in Chapter 7.

In the weeks leading up to the elections, trade union activity increased at the workplace level. Regional activists organised union tours during the first week in



March, and carried out tours in the two weeks leading up to the elections. The first week in March was used for handing out the union election tract and updating the union notice boards. The activists also spent the time talking to workers about issues in the SNCF. In the week leading up to the elections, the core of activists at the regional union carried out union tours during the night and early morning. Benoit said they aimed to cover 'all workplaces' and 'as many workers as possible' in the final days. At each of the workplaces, the activists gave out union election literature and posted propaganda on the union-dedicated notice boards. They reminded workers that the elections were coming up, and asked whether they knew what they were supposed to do on the day. The activists talked to me about the importance of encouraging workers to turn out to vote, and some activists suggested they were willing to break the election procedure rules in order to ensure votes for the union. Didier said to me that he would take the voting cards of workers to the polling stations himself if it meant they had the vote. For the out-of-town ticket offices the activists told workers that there would be replacements to enable them to vote. The research was conducted during this period of heightened activity.

The second important event leading up to the research was the internal crisis within the SUD-Rail federation which had its origins in the conflict over the reorganisation of the SNCF in 2001 (the plan was entitled Cap client or Gestion par Activité). The aim of the reorganisation was to split the railway sector into different branches of activity and to estimate the financing and profitability of each branch of activity. This implied that train lines would be classed according to their profitability. Whilst this reorganisation was to affect the majority of employees, train drivers felt that they would be most affected by the change. The train drivers' union FGAAC and SUD-

Rail engaged in prolonged strike action, but the unions failed to generalise the conflict beyond the train drivers. There were conflicts of opinion amongst federation level members on how to deal with the situation. The union was seen to be adopting an increasingly radical position in a strike that was essentially sectional. In 2002 the position adopted by SUD-Rail seemed to affect voting patterns with a stabilisation in the number of votes for the union. This brought out political tensions in the federation executive and led to the resignation of Franck, who accused the federation of 'bureaucratic practices' (Paccou, 2006). From October 2002 to June 2003, the federation was officially placed under the control of the regional unions, with an increased number of participants in executive meetings to attempt to calm the situation. SUD-Rail's congress took place in June 2003, but as a result of continued internal conflicts, Jean-Paul, Louis and Pierre, from the regional union in this research, resigned from the federal executive. The research was undertaken in the context of continued conflict between the regional union and the federation level, with no participation from the regional union in the federation executive. However, the regional union continued to participate in the federation council.

The third important event providing the context of the research was the recent change in the composition of trade union organisations in the railway sector. In May-June 2003 the CFDT confederation supported unpopular government reforms which led to a large majority of the CFDT railway workers' federation leaving the confederation. There was disagreement amongst the ex-CFDT activists as to whether to join the CGT or SUD-Rail. The union leaders chose the option of joining the CGT, with the main motivation being the size of the organisation, which was able to integrate the ex-CFDT activists. Another motivation was the desire to remain part of a confederal



structure (Paccou, 2006). However, the choice of the CGT was not supported by the majority of ex-CFDT activists, with a large number of unions proposing the option of joining SUD-Rail. For some of the ex-CFDT activists there was a cultural barrier to joining the CGT, where the CGT was viewed as a bureaucratic organisation which the CFDT has fought against for years (Paccou, 2006: 27). With the CFDT representing 10,500 members and 18.75 percent of votes in the CE elections, the choice of the ex-CFDT activists had a significant impact on the CGT and SUD-Rail and both unions offered to meet with and integrate union leaders within their organisation. In October the ex-CFDT activists seemed to turn towards the option of joining SUD-Rail and several agreements were made between the Federation SUD-Rail and groups of ex-CFDT activists. However, in the course of the conflict on deciding which union to join the majority of the ex-CFDT activists left unionism altogether. In March 2004 the CGT claimed that it had gained 600 ex-CFDT members. It is difficult to calculate the number of ex-CFDT activists joining SUD-Rail but between 2003 and 2004, the union saw an increase in membership of 23 percent, around 1400 members. This had an impact on the internal functioning of SUD-Rail as some activists disagreed with the integration of the ex-CFDT activists onto the federal executive. Certain unions in SUD-Rail felt bitter at the fact that the ex-CFDT activists were joining SUD-Rail at such a late stage and that the same activists being welcomed into SUD-Rail were those that had made the creation of the union difficult. This event is significant in the context of this research as the regional union activists who had left the federation executive were against the integration of the ex-CFDT activists onto the SUD-Rail executive and this aggravated tensions between the SUD-Rail federation and the regional union.

## Notes and structure for narrative chapters

The following narrative chapters are structured on the basis of the empirical questions identified in Chapter 2. The overall aim of these chapters is to help *understand* union activism in a particular context by providing detailed accounts of the activities and discussion in the regional union of SUD-Rail. Therefore, in the chapters I present detailed or *thick* descriptions of events and full presentations of texts and activists' narratives. Firstly, in presenting the data I indicate when an activist is speaking directly to me. The translations of documents are in most cases presented in full in the text. Each of the chapters draws on a variety of sources of data, including observations, union documents, and discussions with union activists. Chapter 5 considers the internal practices of the local union and the extent to which the union was able to develop a form of participative democracy, engaging with the first empirical question set out in Chapter 2: to what extent and how is the union SUD-Rail able to build and sustain a form of participative union democracy and to avoid an institutionalised and bureaucratic form of unionism? Chapter 6 explores the extent to which the union was able to construct a 'mass unionism' and the internal and external constraints towards building this model of unionism. This chapter engages with the second empirical question identified in Chapter 2: to what extent and how is SUD-Rail able to build a 'mass unionism' in the context of the internal and external constraints to recruiting members? Chapter 7 consider how the union activists maintained links with workers and deals with the third empirical question: to what extent and how has SUD-Rail been able to maintain close links to the workplace? Chapter 8 considers the way in which the union was able to develop and sustain an adversarial approach to industrial relations and explores the forth



empirical question: to what extent and how does SUD-Rail construct and sustain collective interests and identity in the context of competitive unionism and decline in relevance of traditional trade union ideologies? Chapter 9 reconsiders the debates developed in Chapters 1 and 2 and presents conclusions from the research on the nature and extent of union renewal from the emergence of SUD-Rail and to consider what broader lessons that this case has to offer.

## Chapter 5: Developing and sustaining participative democracy

### Introduction

In Chapter 1 it was argued that an important attribute of union renewal is the development of a form of unionism where processes of mobilisation rest on participative and democratic procedures and practices. Fairbrother (2005) and Hyman (1994) argue that any assessment of the future of trade unions should analyse the ongoing and contested tensions between bureaucratised and democratic forms of organisation. In Chapter 2 it was argued that little is known about the internal functioning of French trade unions, but that unions tend to epitomise a form of representative rather than participative democracy. Andolfatto and Labbé (2000) consider that French trade unions can no longer be seen as democratic organisations and that local union activity is dominated by institutional tasks rather than traditional trade union activities. The SUD unions have the stated aim to respond to the democratic gap in French trade unionism. However, research on the construction of participative democracy in SUD-PTT has shown that the union experienced tensions in their approach and difficulties in upholding democratic principles. This chapter contributes empirical research on the internal processes of unionism in France and further explores the functioning of SUD unions by presenting the internal organisation of SUD-Rail. This chapter considers to what extent and how the activists were able to build and sustain a form of participative democracy in the regional union. The findings presented concentrate on the internal processes of



communication between executive and council members – the ‘mobilisation of bias’ in the construction of collective identity and organisation. The first section considers the different roles and levels of influence of the executive members. The second section considers the social processes of developing and sustaining participative democracy by presenting the organisation of the decision-making bodies and examples of decision-making and participation.

### **Activists’ influence in the regional union**

In terms of the percentage of time, the activists most often present in meetings and more generally in the union office were Jacques, Louis, Jean-Paul, George and Christophe. Jacques was the regional union secretary, Christophe the treasurer, George an executive member, and Jean-Paul and Louis were ex-members of both the regional union and the federation executive. Jean-Paul and Louis were two of the activists responsible for creating SUD-Rail and played an important role in developing structures and activities in the regional union. At the beginning of the research in January 2003 Jean-Paul and Louis were not executive members and had stepped down from the federation 6 months previously. For facilitating discussion of the data this group of activists (Jacques, Jean-Paul, George, Louis and Christophe) are categorised as *leaders*. This interpretation is based on Batstone’s category of *leaders* who are labelled accordingly because of their commitment to union principles and collectivism and their ability and willingness to lead members. In the context of this chapter the categorisation of activists as leaders is based more on the evidence that these activists were willing and able to influence and lead other activists in the regional union. Amongst the executive and council members they

appeared to have the greatest level of involvement and influence in the day-to-day running of the regional union. Other executive members spent varying degrees of time at the regional union office and were involved in the running of the union, but not to the same extent as the *leaders*. The remainder of this section considers the ways in which the leaders influenced union activity and other activists.

As secretary, Jacques played an important role in the regional union and was the only full-time official. For the executive and council meetings Jacques compiled the set of materials, which included the meeting agenda, any supporting documentation and several packs of circulars. Before union executive and council meetings the members were sent a set of materials, or they were able to get a copy at the meeting itself. The circulars for the meetings provided copies of the latest information produced by: the regional union; the federation; the confederation Union syndicale - Solidaires; any associations that the activists support or wish to support; and the press. Jacques was a member of ATTAC and was involved in a range of social movement activities, which included campaigns for the unemployed and precarious workers. With his role as secretary he had the greatest influence on the contents of the materials sent to the members of the two committees, and therefore on the subjects on the agenda. He often included circulars on ATTAC and other social movement documents. Christophe, the regional union treasurer criticised the volume of materials sent out by Jacques. He complained that the members of the executive and council did not read a lot of the tracts from 'other organisations'. Jacques argued the importance for including tracts from other social movement organisations and, whilst for some meetings, there were fewer of these tracts, there continued to be a section with materials on other movements.



The influence of Christophe was evident in his attitudes towards other activists and the decisions made on spending in the union. Christophe was critical of other activists overspending on telephone communication and paper. During an executive meeting there was a discussion on wasting resources:

Christophe:...I am not happy with the amount the telephone is being used...people come in and use it to call mobile phones...and they waste paper printing out too many versions of their tracts.

Jacques:...yes but I do not want to start putting limits on what people can and cannot do in the union...less people will come in...I do not mind if people are trying out different formats for their tracts...I would rather they were doing it than not doing it...and with mobiles...some people can only be contacted using their mobiles when they are out on their job...

[Christophe left the room and came back with the telephone bill and showed it to the executive members.]

Benoit: ...there are not that many calls over 5 minutes...

[Christophe snatched the bill and walked out.]

The minutes for the meeting reported:

#### Treasury

A big increase in spending on paper and telephone communication was stated, some measures were taken for recycling used paper and we need to be

vigilant to not waste paper unnecessarily. Buying a mobile phone for the union with unlimited call time will be looked into for phoning mobiles.

Two months after this meeting the subject was brought up once more and the following decisions were taken.

#### Treasury

To make savings a mobile phone will be bought for the union, with unlimited call time, and a single landline will be kept, but will be reserved for the executive members of the union.

Even though the other activists were keen not to limit the conduct of activists in the regional union, Christophe was able to influence the decisions taken. Christophe was also concerned with the payment of membership fees and stressed that activists should be vigilant with collecting fees.

#### Treasury

Currently 2583 dues have been collected in place of 3583, which means 1000 dues unpaid. A reminder will be sent out to sections to collect remaining dues and they will be required to clarify their situation. A summary of the state of payments of dues by section will be made at each council meeting. It must be remembered that mandates correspond to dues paid and that the congress is open, only to members up to date with their payments.



Christophe was openly critical of section leaders who he thought were 'lazy' when it came to collecting fees. It was made clear by the treasurer that it was the responsibility of the section leaders to collect membership fees and activists were required to justify to the council the position of the section in relation to why membership fees had not been collected.

There was evidence to suggest an important level of influence of Jean-Paul and Louis in relation to shaping union activities. After these activists had left the federation executive over the argument about the functioning of the federation, as discussed in Chapter 4, they returned to the regional level. They were not members of the executive on their return, but they were often present in meetings. Jean-Paul appeared to hold an important place in the regional union and a majority of the activists, including other executive members, often referred to Jean-Paul for help and advice. During both executive and council meetings, Jean-Paul was often critical of the federation and spoke out against activists within the federation executive. In an executive meeting, where Jacques and David had reluctantly agreed to go to a federation council meeting, Jean-Paul said that they should not make any interventions and told them to oppose or abstain from all of the motions. At the federation council meeting Jacques and David did make interventions and they were concerned that Jean-Paul would find out. They agreed they would not tell him they had intervened.

Benjamin and Eric were concerned that Louis and Jean-Paul were accorded a special place in the union from their part in the creation of the union rather than their ability to represent the interests of the railway workers. There were conflicts between, what

Benjamin referred to as, the 'old' and the 'new' generations of activists, with activists from the new generation complaining that, as they did not have the political experience or training that the older generation had experienced, they often clashed in terms of how they wanted the union to be run. This was particularly the case when Louis and Jean-Paul of the 'old generation' wanted to join the regional union executive during the run-up to the workplace elections and Benjamin and Eric objected on the grounds that their appointment was politically motivated. The regional union council voted for Jean-Paul and Louis on a majority, which led to Benjamin and Eric stepping down from the executive. This is discussed further below as an example of decision making in the regional union. In relation to Jean-Paul there were tensions concerning his political commitments outside the union. He was an activist for the Trotskyist party, LCR, and although he did not discuss his political activities in the context of the union, some executive members sought to reinforce the SUD principle that politics should be considered separately from the union activity. A proposal for the following article to be included in the regional union statutes was put forward by the 'executive', but it was unclear which executive members had proposed the motion.

The union esteems it necessary to distinguish its responsibility from those of political groups and intends to keep entire independence with regard to the state, parties, the church, as with all exterior groupings.

This could be interpreted as a sign that there were political influences in the union, or also a sign that executive members who were activists in political parties wanted to reiterate their independence from these parties in their trade union activity.



Louis was to retire in the same year as the congress and had proposed himself as a representative for retired members on the executive. By asking for the following clause to be added to the statutes, it could be interpreted that Benjamin and his section saw a way of lessening his influence in the union.

In light of the specificity of retired agents, they, whilst having a place in our union, cannot take a position on the executive of the union. Also their representatives in the union council cannot participate in the votes.

This proposal was dropped at the regional union congress and Benjamin said to me that there had been a lack of discussion over the motion. The lack of discussion can be interpreted as an outcome of the level of popularity and influence of Louis in the regional union.

The leaders held certain expectations regarding the level of participation of other activists in the regional union. The activists considered that there should be a high level of commitment to participating in union activity, in terms of both spending time on activities in the union and being present during actions and mobilisations. A report of union activity for the regional union congress, written by Jean-Paul, discussed the expectations of activists:

Each section must be able to defend its own prerogatives. But must also invest itself in the common work, for the union, the regional functioning, through the executive, the council, the works council, regional commissions,

etc...The animation of the union, must not stop, for each leader, at the activity of their section.

There is a big disproportion in the investment of different sections. It is clear that it is not always easy for the 'small and medium' sections to invest in the regional level, without the risk of partially deserting the workplace.

But we want to avoid falling into corporatism, if we work collectively, if we do not want that certain militants become bureaucrats and if we want to work democratically, it is essential that we all share all the tasks.

In this text it appears that Jean-Paul is referring back to the founding aims of SUD to encourage involvement in the regional union. Working 'collectively and 'democratically' and to not become 'bureaucrats' were used as arguments for encouraging involvement. George, Jean-Paul and Louis were frequently critical of the lack of commitment shown by other activists to union activity. George was perceived as someone particularly critical of the lack of involvement of activists. In relation to George's approach to other activists in the union, Sylvestre said to me that:

...he is sometimes taken the wrong way as he seems always to be criticising people...it is not really the best way to encourage people to act but it is good that we have him...he is excellent in meetings with management<sup>11</sup>...

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<sup>11</sup> This reference to George being excellent in front of management is related to his interventions in management confrontations. This is discussed further in Chapter 8.



Jean-Paul and Louis also appeared to have high expectations in relation to activists' participation in demonstrations. The following discussion took place with regards to the May Day demonstration:

Jacques: ...who from here will be going...

David: ...not me

Sylvestre: ...me neither, I am working...

Marie: ...I can not...

Jean-Paul: ...tell your bosses who you are and that there is a demo that day...

Sylvestre: ...I am not even an elected representative in my workplace and I am already released more than the elected representative for trade union activities...

Louis: ...working is not a good enough excuse...

David: ...Sylvestre is right...it is a problem if you are working...it is complicated to get off work.

Jacques: ...if there are already only 2 or 3 who can go from the executive it does not look good for motivating the rest...

George: ...the demo does not interest anyone...even when the National Front was in the second round of elections we were still not 50 for the May Day demo...

Jean-Paul: ...leave it then...we will work on other demos and not bother...we will do a minimum service and have a delegation of as many as we can get....we will leave the objective of trying to get 50 and there is no point in doing the banners I suggested with only 4 or 5 people...it is ridiculous...go on to the next point...

After this meeting Sylvestre talked to me about how the commitment and participation expected of him was at times excessive and that:

...unionism is tiring...sometimes you just feel like saying that is enough...

The minutes on the subject of the May Day demonstration were as follows:

#### May Day Demo

This day is important; the union must be as well represented as possible as this day will be the first day of action against the reform of health insurance. Despite the difficulties of mobilising on a Saturday at 15h, the union is giving itself an objective of bringing together 50 comrades<sup>12</sup>. 3 Chinese banderols will be made. A letter will be addressed to all activists, followed by a telephone call. Meeting place before the demo is at the local union at 14h.

It was not clear whether Jacques or Jean-Paul had written the minutes but this nonetheless reflects Jean-Paul's influence on shaping union practice outside the formal meetings. In spite of his last intervention on the May Day demonstration, the objective for the day of action was as he had requested. Jean-Paul played an important role in writing documents for the union and in executive meetings discussing the responsibility of writing congress documents he offered to write the main strategy report for the regional union. In general it was the *leaders* who were most involved in writing documents for the regional union.

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<sup>12</sup> The term used in French was 'camarade', which could be translated as 'friend' or 'comrade'.



Outside the *leaders* the executive members in general had an important level of influence on activists within their section level. The remainder of the executive could be categorised, in Batstone's terms as forming a *quasi-elite*. They formed a key group in terms of reaffirmation of union values and they were continually concerned with maintaining and developing union organisation. The executive members had an important responsibility for union resources. For every vote the union gained in workplace elections they were allocated 2 hours 'union activity time' by the employer. This was allocated to the union at the federation level and then distributed out to union regions as a proportion of election results. These hours were used to 'pay' for the detachment of permanent officials in the union and for duties attached to running the regional union and its sections. The executive members, who were leaders of their respective sections, had a book of union vouchers, which could be redeemed for time off from the employer. These time resources were in addition to the time resources for elected union representatives. The leaders of the sections had access at all times to these resources and were responsible for distributing vouchers out to the activists from their respective sections. On handing out these vouchers at the end of meetings the activists made jokes with the section leaders, pretending to steal the books of vouchers from the section leaders. There was a degree of importance attached to being responsible for these time resources.

The remainder of this chapter and the following chapters further explore the nature and roles of the leaders and other executive members. Further discussion of the analytical categorisation of leaders is discussed in the Chapter 9. At this stage the

category of *leaders* is used as a descriptive tool for separating levels of influence within the executive.

### **Building participative democracy**

The regional executive was the decision-making body that met most frequently in the regional union with meetings taking place twice a month. The aim was to have a representative from each of the 12 workplace section on the executive, but the union rules stated that this was desirable rather than compulsory. The members were voted in at the regional congress, held every three years. On average there were nine members present at the meetings, but this ranged from between four (George, Christophe, Jacques, Louis) and eleven (Jacques, George, Christophe, Marie, Benoit, Jean-Paul, Louis, Sylvestre, Philippe, David, Gilles) in meetings over a five-month period, from February to June 2004. Participation fluctuated in relation to union activity and to the time of year. It was greater around the time of the workplace elections in March, and declined towards the summer period. The regional council meetings were held five times a year and the members included: the regional executive; all works council representatives and substitutes; regional level activists serving on the federal executive; activists who had a mandated position at national level; and DPs and their deputies from the workplace sections. The activists from workplace sections were allocated on the basis of the number of membership dues, using the average of 10 dues per member. The formula was one council member for fewer than 25 members, 2 for between 25 and 50 members and 3 for over 50 members. The regional council was the body that aimed to bring the interests of the members of each of the sections to the union. There were 24 representatives on the



council, with an average of 22 participants over four meetings. Whilst these were the numbers present in the meetings, there was increased activity on days of regional council meetings, with activists interrupting, joining or leaving the meeting and there were often informal separate discussions in adjoining rooms. There was an agenda of points to be discussed, but meetings rarely covered all the issues as debates often went on longer than planned. The issues discussed in the meetings were: motions put forward by workplace sections; post-election reports, the allocation of time resources; the regional union budget and position of treasurer, strikes and mobilisations; the functioning of the union; and issues concerning PS25s (contract workers). During each meeting there were often one or two debates that dominated the entire day, including discussions at lunchtime and the outcome of these debates tended to frame the atmosphere for the remainder of the meeting.

The executive meetings covered a wide range of issues, which are listed in table 5.1. There was often a disjuncture between the agenda and the items actually discussed, and between the items discussed and the minutes recorded. There were often too many issues raised for discussion in the time available or there were certain issues that dominated the discussion.

**Table 5.1 Executive meeting agenda items**

| Agenda item                               | No. of occurrences |
|---|--------------------|
| Regional union admin/functioning          | 40                 |
| Strikes/actions/demonstrations            | 21                 |
| Training for activists                    | 11                 |
| Other status employees (contract/private) | 8                  |
| Sector/company issues                     | 7                  |
| Workplace elections                       | 5                  |
| Federation meetings/issues                | 4                  |
| Meetings with management                  | 3                  |
| Other organisations                       | 3                  |
| Joint union meetings                      | 1                  |

Source: Regional union documents

This gives a basic overview of the issues that dominated the agenda in the executive meetings. Over 40 per cent of the time in meetings was spent on issues surrounding the functioning of the union. In order of the frequency of occurrences, the kinds of issues discussed in relation to union functioning were: ‘bureaucracy’ in the regional union; the amount of information given out to members; union budget and treasury issues; preparation for regional council meetings and the regional congress; the allocation of time resources for activists; designating full-time activists to work in the union; organising the preparations for celebrations for union activists retiring and the post-workplace election party; the union newsletter; deciding on the layout of union diaries; and allocating representatives for works council and union committees. The second most frequently discussed issues related to strikes, actions and demonstrations. The key concerns were to do with participation in strike actions and the preparatory activity for the actions. Meetings were also used as a platform for



activists to put forward planned actions within the different workplace sections. There appeared to be a fairly independent functioning in the sections with activists taking the initiative to organise strikes or actions in their respective sections. Out of the 21 mobilisations, twelve were strikes or actions within the railway sector and nine were mobilisations for more general social issues. The issues for the sector-specific strikes and actions included: equal rights for contract workers; proposed changes to working patterns; access to free underground travel for employees; freight privatisation; suppression of jobs; and management salary increases.

The decision-making process required that proposals for union activity were discussed by the executive members and then put to the council members for ratification. However, many proposals were decided upon at executive level, without the council members' involvement. This was an outcome of the greater frequency of executive compared to council meetings, but it can also be interpreted as a sign of leadership taken by certain activists in instigating and carrying out activities. The text below describes in full the activity and the composition of the executive and the regional council. At the regional congress there were several motions for modifying articles in the statutes to reinforce the democratic functioning of the regional union. These were put forward mainly by the drivers' section, led by Benjamin and Henri. The changes proposed by this section could be related to the tensions over the influence on decision-making of certain members of the executive, particularly Jean-Paul and Louis. The proposed motions are in italics in the text.

#### Article 8: Functioning of the executive and the council

- 8.1 In the interval between congresses, the union council and the union executive govern the union. *(Debate to change this article to 'the union is governed by the union council for union strategy and by the union executive for the daily running of the union.)*
- 8.2 The union council is composed of:
- The union executive (elected at the congress)
  - The works council delegation
  - Members from the region union on the federation executive
  - Militants with national, professional or inter-professional mandates
  - Representatives from union sections in relation to the number of membership dues paid (average of 10 dues per member) and according to the following formula:
    - a) 1 representative for less than 25 members.
    - b) 2 representatives for 25-50 members.
    - c) 3 representatives above 50 members.
- 8.3 5 meetings are held a year. *(Debate to change this to 6 times per year.)*
- 8.4 The union elaborates and adopts an annual plan of work and manages a budget
- 8.5 The union is a place of debates, analysis, exchange of experiences and propositions
- 8.6 In order to guarantee democratic practices, the members of the council cannot delegate votes.
- 8.7 For the votes, it is necessary to have a minimum of 55 % of mandates (dues paid)



- 8.8 The regional executive is composed of a minimum of 10 members and a maximum of 15 members elected by the congress (the representation of each section being desirable)...*(Debate to modify this article to 'The regional executive is composed of as many members as sections of activity, elected by the congress. The representation of each section of activity is desirable.');* *The secretary and the treasurer are equally elected by the congress, after candidates elected to the executive.)*
- 8.9 The regional executive meets at least twice per month. It can be reassembled, either by the initiative of the regional secretary or by the demand of a third of its members. *(Debate to modify this article to 'meet once every 3 weeks'.)*
- 8.10 It insures the ongoing management respecting the general orientations taken by the regional council.

The articles for debate in italics demonstrate the concerns held by the drivers' section about the functioning of the regional union, particularly in relation to the level of decision-making accorded to the regional union executive. The proposed articles could be seen as aimed at increasing the role of the regional council and decreasing both the frequency of meetings and the role of the executive. From the proposed change to article 8.1, which was to separate the daily running from the strategy of the union, it could be interpreted that, rather than being conferred to the regional council, the strategy of the regional union was perceived to be heavily influenced by executive members. The proposals to modify articles were dropped in the congress and, similar to the discussion on the influence of Louis and Jean-Pail above,

Benjamin argued that there was a lack of debate and discussion on his sections proposed changes to the statutes.

Documents produced by the regional union executive for the council and members show the importance of the notion of ‘union democracy’ for developing a ‘grassroots’ unionism. An extract from the ‘strategy report’ for 2004 is presented in full below.

Strategy report (*Rapport d’orientation*)

4) Plan of action for the SUD-Rail [regional union]

4-1) Why SUD-Rail?

4-1-1) The creation of SUD-Rail and our union in the SNCF [region] responded to a very strong demand for internal democracy (liberty of expression, respect of rules, limitation of mandates in order to avoid professionalisation), worker democracy (listening to the grassroots, developing structures of self-organisation during conflicts, unity of union organisations...) and a desire for railway unionism to exit from corporatism by opening our action to wider social struggles.

4-1-2) After eight years even though we should not be embarrassed by our practice, which has always tried to stick the closest possible to the demands of the grassroots, we have learnt that nothing is certain and that bureaucratisation threatens organisations including ours.

4-1-3) It is not enough to write nice congress texts and resolutions only to put them in the cupboards afterwards. The drift noticed in the



functioning of the federation but also in our union (at the regional and section level) is an outcome of the institutionalisation of our unionism, routine and not respecting our basic charters.

4-1-4) What we have written from our former congresses has not been written in stone but has been experienced in the complicated day-to-day of unionism. For the three years to come we will continue to fight for our founding principles *'SUD-Rail participates in a profound movement which is emerging in unionism aimed at combating bureaucracy, anti-democratic methods, wooden language and sectarianism'* *'SUD-Rail has the big responsibility of being an example for the social movement and for its members.'*

4-2) The union section, the basis of our democracy

4-2-1) If we affirm that the union section is the basis of our democratic functioning it is not by dogmatism or routine but simply because this corresponds with our desire for a grassroots unionism. The union section is organised on the basis of location (or company in the private sector) in order to facilitate the representation of employees' interests and to give weight to local organisation.

This shows a degree of critical reflection in the union towards the emerging practices. There was a disjuncture perceived between the regional union's aims for internal and worker democracy and the practices developed in the regional union. This disjuncture is described in terms of the 'institutionalisation of our unionism', 'routine' and 'not respecting our basic charters'. The notion of the regional union

being ‘democratic’ and resisting pressures towards ‘union bureaucracy’ and ‘institutionalisation’ were prevalent in discussions taking place in executive and council meetings. Activists often discussed the lack of ‘democracy’ in the union movement, notably in relation to the two largest union confederations, the CGT and the CFDT. In discussions with me the activists talked about the importance to them of being in a ‘democratic’ union.

...I have been a member of SUD-Rail since 1999...this is just the beginning of unionism for me...I joined because I liked the union’s ideas...if the union becomes like the CFDT then I would stop my membership...I joined because I wanted to be in a union that was less centralised and more democratic.  
(Christine)

There was however awareness amongst the executive members that the process of union growth contained what they termed ‘pressures towards bureaucracy’ and ‘institutionalisation’. In a discussion with me Philippe highlighted the dilemma of these ‘pressures’ for union development:

...we want to be different from the other unions...more democratic...less bureaucratised...I am aware of the contradictory nature of our task and our development...we want to become a bigger force in the union movement but we do not want to become institutionalised...we have a turnover of representatives and full-time activists...allows for new militants to come in who have not been institutionalised into the role of a full-time activist...who becomes distant from the daily routine of work and distant from workers...we



have to be careful not to suddenly find ourselves being the union we did not want to become...this means having a daily awareness of how we are building the rebuilding the union...

The problem of developing what was perceived to be a bureaucratic form of unionism was a common fear amongst executive and council members of the regional union. Most activists had past experience with the CGT or the CFDT, either as a member or an activist, and in talking to me some expressed general fears of SUD-Rail developing into this 'type' of unionism, which they thought of as 'institutionalised' and 'bureaucratic'. During an executive meeting Christophe said he was worried that the regional union was becoming too 'bureaucratic'. David said that Christophe was being too pessimistic and that the union could always function better. He said that it was functioning well at the moment. Activists working at the section level were more optimistic about the functioning of the regional union compared to that CGT and the CFDT.

...I do not like the functioning of the CGT...it is too hierarchical...has links with the communist party which I do not agree with...in meetings only a few CGT unionists speak and the others just follow...the position comes from above and the rest follow...I was a member of the CFDT since joining the SNCF after leaving school...when the union split I liked the ideas and principles of SUD-Rail...everybody had a place...you could speak out even against the union...there are some who do not support union action and will say they do not support it... (Didier)

In order to prevent 'bureaucracy' there were rules on the length of tenure of and official positions in the regional union. The statutes presented the rules for full-time officials as follows:

Article 11: Detached and full-time activists

- 11.1 Militants who are totally cleared from work for whatever activity (monthly union service, union delegation, employers' time or other...) are considered as full-time activists
- 11.2 The period of full-time release is limited to 6 consecutive years maximum. This length can be prolonged for a period that cannot go above one year.
- 11.3 The union must take responsibility for the transition back to work of those concerned.
- 11.4 The union executive is released on average 66 % during no more than 3 years.

There were concerns about the difficulties of replacing leaders on the executive, because of their level of involvement in the regional union and their experience. Even where activists had given up official position in the union (for example George as the secretary, or Jean-Paul and Louis having no official position in the regional union after leaving the federation executive), the majority of them were still heavily involved in union. In relation to replacing activists, Sylvestre said to me that:

...the militants who formed the union are starting to retire and they are worried that there are no young militants to replace them...



An example of the difficulties of replacing activists emerged from the retirement of the regional union treasurer, Christophe. Marie had nominated herself to replace Christophe with the initial support of the other executive members. Some of the executive members suggested that Marie came in for two weeks to observe treasury work. Marie said in a later meeting that in seeing the amount of work that was expected in addition to the role of treasurer it was not possible to replace him and continue working at the same time. She said that Christophe dealt with IT problems, wrote tracts and the union newsletter as well as working on treasury activities. In a council meeting a month later to decide on the new treasurer Marie was not present and Christophe said that she was not up to the role. He said he was 'not being nasty...just realistic'. In the debate Christophe brought up the argument that Marie has just been through a divorce and had children and he questioned whether she would be able to commit enough time to the post. The executive members suggested that Benoit, who was in the regional office but not in the room at the time, should take the post. Christophe said that Benoit, as the leader of his section, was more involved and more experienced in the range of activities that surrounded the role of treasurer. When Benoit returned he agreed that he could take on the role but that it was a lot of work. The minutes were as follows:

#### Treasury

Benoit is proposed by the executive to take the post of treasurer with Henri as deputy treasurer following the departure of Christophe. This proposition will be presented to the next council meeting.

In a later meeting the council agreed with the decision to appoint Benoit as treasurer. Marie worked closely with Benoit in their section, but she seemed to be more frustrated with the members of the executive than with Benoit. In the congress that followed 5 months later Marie did not put herself forward for re-election on the regional executive, which meant there were no female executive members. Whilst these two events may have been unrelated, Marie's participation in the regional union declined after this decision and she made fewer interventions in the regional union meetings.

Sylvestre appeared to be concerned about the potential for activists to take advantage of their position in the union. For example, there were debates in the union about the practice of the monthly turnover of permanent activists in the union. When executive members complained about union functioning, Jacques said that there were only three people carrying out work for the union. He said it was not enough and that he thought maybe having more people to work in the union could help. He said that this did not have to be full-time activists but a more flexible functioning where he could go out to his section during the day and leave other activists to carry out his role as secretary. Otherwise he said he still went on union rounds but that it tended to be on his own in the evening outside union hours. George argued that to have more continuity in union activity the regional union needed full-time activists for more than one month at a time. Sylvestre responded by saying that he thought that was exactly what they did not want. In relation to activists attitudes towards being on full-time duty Sylvestre said to me that:



...some activists prefer to be in the union office than out on the tracks...of course it is more comfortable to be doing that...but that is not the idea of unionism...

This highlights the potential attitudes of activists towards being on union duty. However, a regional union report written by the executive on the activity in the regional union shows that overall the activists perceived that they were able to adhere to the statutes in terms of the turnover of activists in the regional union.

#### The regional team

In 3 years, the leadership team...has been modified several times.

Conforming to our statutes, this situation avoids the accumulation of mandates, and has also allowed new members to take responsibility and to take part in decision-making and developing union strategy.

This renewal, which has been necessary and voluntary in nature, has had disadvantages. Lack of participation in the union, insufficient knowledge and experience in the different employee representative institutions (DP, CHSCT, CE, regional and national commissions, elections, etc.) as well as changes in the most important leaders from certain sections, has led to difficulties in the keeping track of issues...

The desire of the union, despite the inconveniences due to the renewal of its leaders, to respect its statutes in term of the non-accumulation of mandates

and full-time activists (with a turnover of activists on service each month, for all the activists who desire it, not having regional and federal responsibilities at the same time, etc.) has finished by being worthwhile in terms of training and experience acquired. This voluntary effort, sometimes difficult to hold, has paid off.

Today, the renewal is real, whether it is for the members of the executive, members of the council, the CE delegation or the leaders of the sections.

The renewal has been made and materialises a little bit more each day.

This report reflects on the tensions of the regional union's strategy for having a turnover of activists in union positions. However, in spite of the inconveniences there was a perception overall that the regional union was able to respect its statutes.

### *Processes of decision-making*

The regional council was used for important decisions in the union and executive members encouraged participation in decision-making. However, they also recognised the problems of involving more activists in the decision-making processes. A motion was put forward in an executive meeting by Jean-Paul to have the elected representative participate in the organisation of the regional union congress. Jacques and George disagreed with this and George said:

...the more we are the more it does not work...



Activists were often frustrated with the way the meetings were conducted and Benjamin said during a council meeting where an argument was taking place over the federation:

....I know this is democratic but it is a bloody mess....

An example of the lengthy nature of decision-making was in relation to the time resources allocated to the sections. The main resource for trade union activists was the hours allocated for union activity. Every year the union sections each applied for a number of days dependent on their requirements. The leaders of each section had to set their requirements against time that was allocated for elected positions in workplace representative institutions, as the hours designated for elected roles were considered as time for union activities. The types of activities the activists claimed for included workplace tours, union information sessions, section meetings and writing both union tracts and reports from representative meetings with management. The hours were allocated to sections based on the numbers of members, the number of elected representative positions held by activists in the section (already giving them access to time resources), and on the potential for development in the union section. For example, the cleaning section of the union did not hold any elected positions but had the second largest group of members (158). The activists in this section did not have access to hours paid for by the employer and thus relied on hours designated by the regional union to carry out any activities. The importance of the section in terms of membership was thus an important influence on the allocation of resources. There was contention between the sections as to how many hours

should be allocated and on what basis. For the year 2004 the regional union was allocated 1180 days, a third of which were designated for running the regional union. The remaining two thirds, 787 days, were allotted to regional union sections. The allocated time resources ran from September 2003 to August 2004, but because of the time taken up with the preparation for the workplace elections in March 2004, the allocations from September 2003 were not been agreed upon until the end of March 2004 . The workplace sections had put their proposals forward at the beginning of the year 2004. The minutes from a meeting on the 2 February 2004 read as follows:

#### Time resources

The demands of the sections have been analysed by the executive. 4 sections are demanding a cover much higher than last year, customer service and operations, train conductors, building maintenance and cleaning. The dossier will be discussed at the executive meeting on 16 February so that all the demands and the work plans can be studied, with a view of presenting a proposition from the executive at the council meeting on the 23 February. 4 sections are demanding special supplementary resources for the workplace elections; the executive has decided to give out a cover of 50 days: 20 for [customer services and operations in the outlying districts], 10 for [central Paris], 5 for [building maintenance], 8 for [train conductors]...

George said he disagreed with number of days that some sections were requesting, saying he was suspicious about how the days were being used. Because of the disagreements on the allocations this issue ran on until after the workplace elections at the end of March when it was then put to the regional council. There were two



proposals discussed by the council. The first was to keep the same allocation from the previous year and the second was to use a statistical formula, based on members, election results and numbers of activists, to calculate the allocation. The activists debated for an hour over the issue, with some arguing that the allocation was not fair and that their section needed more resources. During the discussion David began shouting over the debate, saying that it was:

...a waste of time talking about this...it is the third meeting it has come up and it is the third meeting we have argued over it...

They voted to use the allocations from the previous year, which caused problems for some activists, especially Benoit who was demanding more resources in order to help develop his section. This example highlights that the union was a place for debates and discussion regarding important decisions for the regional union, but that taking decisions could be lengthy and difficult.

The following examples of the practice of decision-making in the regional union highlight underlying tensions between certain groups of activists in the union and the desire of activists to uphold union democracy. The decisions were on motions put forward by section leaders, firstly, by Benoit, for the misrepresentation of the regional union at the federation level by Philippe and secondly, by the executive, for the enlargement of the executive to include Jean-Paul and Louis. During a council meeting a motion was put forward criticising Philippe for having misrepresented the regional union at a federation council meeting. Philippe was a member of the regional union executive and council, but his attendance was rare in both meetings.

He appeared to be more involved at the federation level and there were obvious tensions between Philippe and the majority of executive members. The motion put forward is presented in full below.

#### The facts

On 9 December 2003 during a federal council meeting and in front of all the unions of the federation Philippe got angry with two democratically designated representatives from the regional union. In a rude tone, he showed contempt for the functioning of the union and made personal attacks, nothing was spared for our two delegates. In spite of warnings and discussions with him, this type of intervention in the federal council on the part of Philippe is the last in a long list.

Philippe is a member of the regional union executive and participates in federal councils only because he of his designation in liaison committees for his workplace and for management staff. He is therefore free to defend his positions in the union, be it individually or collectively, by means of his union section. At no point has his freedom of speech been blocked in union meetings. His absence from the union is not an excuse to express himself outside.

In addition it is necessary to remember that the federal council is not a soapbox for individual activists but the expression of the will of the unions and their representatives. **If the members of the federal executive and the leaders of the liaisons participate, it is evident that their freedom of speech, that we are not contesting, should respect the collective expression of the union and committees represented.**



The representative of a liaison committee has legitimacy to speak at the federal council only on those subjects that concern his liaison/section. Philippe's intervention in reaction to the motion of the regional union on the integration of ex-CFDT members on the federal executive (a motion adopted by the majority of the regional executive) does not concern [Philippe's workplace section] or the liaison for management staff and we do not see the legitimacy of a workplace section giving lessons to a union (the democratic structure at the base of the federation). Moreover, despite his attack, Philippe spoke only for himself, as his two sections had not been consulted beforehand, neither had they designated Philippe to contest the positions of the regional union.

The day after the federal council, the regional union executive, concerned with transparency, requested to meet with Philippe's section to try to collectively find a solution to the problem. The section declined this invitation and several letters, at times injurious and insulting, have been sent by members of his section to members of the executive.

To this day, no dialogue has been had with the section and Philippe does not want to modify his attitude at the federal council.

In consequence, the regional union council assembled...recalls:

- that Philippe holds his two mandates, one from his section and one for the liaison committee for management staff and that according to our statutes, a representative of the union is, at every moment, revocable by the union council
- that Philippe, spokesperson for a section of 26 members, cannot be valued over the legitimacy of the 820 other members of the union

- that the debates must take place in our structures (sections and councils) and the decisions adopted by a majority.'

And decide

To validate the decision of the executive to meet with the workplace section and regret the rejection of this proposition by the section.

To withdraw Philippe's mandates on liaisons committees of management staff and [his workplace section]. He will, thus, be able to participate in the work of these sections but will no longer have any legitimacy to participate at the federal councils.

For the attention of the regional union executive for presentation at the next union council.

The customer service and operations section will verify during its next meeting the effects of this motion.

Vote for 28

Against 1

Abstention 5

The section will vote at the council in proportion to the result indicated above.

The motion led to a long debate amongst the council members, which dominated the remainder of the meeting. There were interventions from each section; some speaking out angrily against the activist concerned, whilst others spoke generally about the motion itself. The issue of 'democracy' within the union was frequently brought into the debate as activists claimed it was undemocratic of the activist concerned to have spoken out against his union. Two interventions were from



sections choosing not to participate in the vote. The drivers' argued that the motion was a case of individuals rather than democracy in the union. They submitted a written response to the motion:

The issue of Philippe's position in the union

We consider that we can no longer have an objective position following the different debates. We consider that it is now an affair of individuals, viewing the currents in foreign political organisations at SUD-Rail. These debates no longer interest us and are out of the context of the development of SUD-Rail and the workplace elections which are approaching. We therefore will not participate either in the debate or the vote.

The comment on the 'foreign political organisations' appears to relate to the political parties supported by the activists in the regional union executive. Nonetheless, the majority of sections agreed that it had not been Philippe's right to speak out against the union. In the meeting Christophe said:

...it is within our statutes that you represent the views of the union decided at the council and the executive...your section has the right to set up its own union if you do not agree with the statutes...

This highlights the tensions between the sections and the potential for union fragmentation. The motion was passed and Philippe's mandates to represent the union at the federation level were withdrawn. The results were 72 per cent for the motion, 12 per cent against and 16 per cent abstentions. The debate had a further

impact in the regional union as the statutes were modified to contain the following paragraph.

Freedom of speech and action is encouraged in the union (see the member's charter) and the union must put in place the means for opinions to be expressed. However, a militant designated to represent the union must respect his/her mandate and put forward the collective decisions before his personal approach. In case of disagreement he can give up his mandate, just as the union council has the power to revoke it at any moment.

The second motion during the same meeting was the enlargement of the executive to include Louis and Jean-Paul. The reason given for the enlargement was the increased workload in the run-up to the workplace elections. The drivers' section once again abstained in the vote and Benjamin spoke out against the motion saying:

...we [the drivers' section] are not participating in the vote...the political agenda is hidden...I left the executive because I did not agree with how it was run...the new generation of activists do not have the political formation<sup>13</sup> of the older activists...there is a conflict between the old and the new but it is the old dominating how the union is run...

Benjamin's section were worried about the distancing of the regional union from the federation and wanted to overcome the conflicts between Louis and Jean-Paul with

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<sup>13</sup> The word here in French is 'formation' which translated can mean 'development', 'background' 'training', or 'shaping'. I have left it as formation because of the potentially ambiguous meaning.



federation activists. In relation to the enlargement of the executive Benjamin handed out a written response to the motion:

### The enlargement of the executive

After the congress in June, which went well in light of the circumstances, we evoked the participation of a second driver on the executive. Since then, unfortunately, the attitude of certain individuals in the union has changed the situation. Today it is not possible that a [driver activist] participates in an executive where the principal work consists of denigrating the actions of the SUD-Rail federation, and compromising its financial situation. In not paying the regional union's contribution for participation in the congress in June (when we have often financially supported the federation, associations and unions in the context of developing SUD-Rail) and to work in isolation, seems contrary to our principles and statutes which advocate the development of SUD-Rail towards a mass unionism.

In this context, we abstain on all the new candidates for the regional executive, as we have no guarantees and no clear vision of action of the regional union.

...

The drivers' section laments this situation as from the beginning we have worked for the development of our section and SUD-Rail. All the same we commit to participating actively in regional union actions and we would certainly come back to participating in the executive when the situation becomes clearer.

The motion was adopted to enlarge the executive; the result was 78 percent for the motion, 6 percent against and 16 per cent abstention. The motion brought out tensions between the drivers' section and some members of the executive. Sylvestre discussed his concerns with me on the nature of the debates that took place in the meetings.

...there are internal disagreements going on at the moment...three members of the federal executive left because they were accused by Franck [federation executive member] of having a political agenda and of taking too much power in the federation...I have confidence in the three of them but now there are conflicts between the regions...in [the regional union] we are used to confronting each other if we have a problem about anything...I personally disagree with this way of functioning but I accept it anyway...the other unions [i.e. forming part of SUD-Rail federation] are not used to functioning in this way and this is perhaps the reason why our activists were not accepted within the federation...

There was a fairly constant flow of criticism from Benjamin in and outside meetings, as is demonstrated in the above examples. He expressed his concerns in the meeting that:

...these meetings revolve around the functioning of the union...the practice is lost...we never talk about the problems of railway workers...



The motion on the enlargement of the executive to include Jean-Paul and Louis appeared to intensify Benjamin's negative attitude towards the executive. After the workplace elections, where Benjamin gained an elected position on the CE, he was invited to take part in the executive meetings to discuss CE issues. Benjamin attended the meeting but once the issues for the CE had finished he left saying he had not attended to discuss executive issues. Louis said he was irritated by Benjamin's behaviour. This section shows how the old and new generation of activists clashed over the functioning of the union.

### *Participation in the regional union*

In both executive and council meetings, the *leaders* (Jacques, Jean-Paul, George, Christophe) dominated interventions and in general interventions were mostly from the male members of the executive and the council. However, in council meetings the secretary encouraged interventions from all members to update the council on their activities. The activists were generally supportive of each other offering help and advice to council members with problems. After the workplace elections in March 2004, the executive organised a regional council meeting to discuss the results. Jacques asked each section to run through the results. The first to report was from the train conductor section where the regional union was not well represented or supported. Henri, who had been with the regional union for 10 months and had been appointed the leader activist for the section discussed the results from his section:

...the union is not working in my section, it was a defeat...one of the reasons I suspect is my level of education...I have Bac plus three...maybe workers are suspicious of me...the section is a stronghold for the CFDT and people just vote for their mates...I have done all I could have done in the last 10 months...I have handed out tracts...done workplace tours and been to the union information hour...

The executive members responded to Henri's intervention:

Jacques: ...do not be disappointed...you are trying to organise one of the most difficult sections... you have been there for 10 months...they have been members of the CFDT and CGT for years...in two years time with work you could be a DP...

Christophe: ...we need less politics and more unionism...we have paid the price for too much politics...

David: ...I did think the tracts from the section were too radical and political....

Henri agreed with the executive members and said he would continue to work to build up his section. Activists from stronger sections offered advice for success. Benjamin from the drivers' section said that votes had remained stable and in some areas they had increased their support which was thanks to:

...a grassroots unionism where we have worked very hard...



Benoit intervened for strongest section of the regional union saying:

...there has been an increase in the section and we are now the majority union...it has been thanks to a strong involvement at the workplace level that we have made gains...the management turn towards us now as we are the majority union in the section...if you are a majority union that will happen...it is up to you to act...

With each intervention there were responses from other sections and members of the executive. In general the activists appeared to be supportive of the different sections, giving advice where they thought the section might improve. However, there were tensions brought out between certain sections and between categories of workers. Philippe intervened for the union section representing management grades and said that these workers also needed to be represented by the union. He said that support had increased in his section, but that UNSA was still dominant amongst management staff. In response several of the activists began laughing and started talking amongst themselves. Eric said to the activists next to him that it was good that SUD was not strong amongst management staff as it was not a union for management. Louis said that there were 'collaborators' amongst management staff and that they need to be wary of management staff. Philippe continued criticising the lack of reflection by the regional union:

...it is good to have 15 per cent in the SNCF...but we need to look at whether the union is useful and effective...what are our demands...stickers are not enough...putting union stickers everywhere is not sufficient...

...the failure for some sections has not been a problem of individual or sectors...it also was not the fault of the CGT that we lost out...it is the failure of the union...a failure of the executive and of the activities of the union...

Several members of the council reacted to Philippe's criticisms:

...it is not up to you to talk about other sections, saying whether they are good or bad...it is not collective to be doing that... (Louis)

...you always make the same argument...but you do not know the practice of other union sections... (Marie)

...it does not matter whether the CGT is strong or not it is about SUD...the CGT has been called in question thanks to us... (Jacques)

During the debates some activists became aggressive and were critical of the performance of other union sections. Viviane reported results from her section representing customer service workers. She reported that her section had not made any progress. Fathi, who represented workers in building maintenance and where there had been an increase in election support, stopped her mid-sentence and asked to know why her section had performed badly. Benjamin told him to 'shut-up' and Jacques said to 'let her speak'. Viviane asked whether she had interrupted Fathi when he had spoken and stopped her intervention and would not continue despite requests from Jacques for her to continue. This brings to light the participation of



women in the interventions within the council and the executive. There were five women on the regional council out of 24 members in total and they intervened less than the male members during meetings. This was a concern for the executive members and they tried to encourage interventions from all council members. The participation of women in the union was explicitly discussed in an executive meeting on the issue of setting up a commission for women at the federation level to help increase the participation of women in the union. Christophe and Louis said they were not interested in the subject, but Christophe clarified that it was the setting up of another committee that he was not interested in rather than not being interested in women's issues. He continued by saying that the male members of the executive had been accused by some female federation members of being 'macho' in the union but he said he did not know what they meant and that he did not think it was the case.

Benjamin said in response:

...it is the behaviour in meetings...the shouting...we shout at each other and it is aggressive...I know a lot of women in this union and it is not their way of working and getting things done...it just puts them off...

Benjamin's perception of the way in which the regional union functioned had important implications for developing participation. This perhaps helps to explain why there were few women members on decision making bodies and participating in the executive and council meetings.

The social and informal activities, such as coffee, lunch and drinks (aperitifs) outside the formal meetings seemed to encourage participation in the union. It was a space

for activists to talk outside the formal meetings and to make sense of and debate decisions and positions taken within the meetings. A regular activity was for the activists to eat lunch at the regional union office in the interval of meetings<sup>14</sup>. The executive encouraged the activists to eat together on a daily basis at the regional union office<sup>15</sup>. For the activists it appeared to be considered as much a part of union activity as the union meetings. It was mostly Louis and Jean-Paul who encouraged this activity. Sylvestre said to me that:

...Louis encourages us to eat together...he says it is more convivial and is not too expensive...it means militants get to talk informally....

During executive and council meetings, which took place over a day, activists left to prepare the food and participants would come and go from the meetings, usually beginning the 'apero' (an aperitif) before the meeting was due to break. It was a place for other activists passing by the union office to discuss and meet informally with the executive members. If activists arrived who were not part of the meeting they often stayed for lunch. During the executive and regional council meeting some activists said they wanted to organise a quick lunch or buy a sandwich and finish the meetings earlier, but both Louis and Jean-Paul insisted that they eat together. The content of discussions over lunch often followed on from issues and debates from the

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<sup>14</sup> During meetings the leaders also regularly put forward social activities, which included barbecues during or after union actions and mobilisations, drinks for special occasions, such as birthdays or retirements, and performances for large union events such as general assemblies and the union congress. The leaders organised these activities and participants paid a contribution. Jacques said that the social activities were inclusive to all SUD-Rail activists, members *and* sympathisers as long as a contribution was paid. For the barbecues organised during regional mobilisations, activists from other unions paid and ate with the SUD-Rail activists. In larger mobilisations other unions often provided their own service.

<sup>15</sup> The lunch activity within the union was seasonal. During the summer months of July and August there were fewer activists passing by the union office and there were fewer meetings.



meetings. Tensions between certain activists spilled over into lunchtime and comments were frequently made that the conflicts were not conducive to union functioning. This was the case with Jean-Paul and Benjamin who had disagreements over the way the union functioned at the regional level. During lunch times a debate would often turn into an argument between two conflicting groups within the regional union. Sometimes the arguments arose from Jean-Paul discussing political issues or from his criticisms of the activists in the federation. During a lunch debate Jean-Paul followed up on the discussions that had taken place in the meeting. He talked about how he thought SUD-Rail was going in the same direction as the CFDT and that there was a crisis in the union because of the way the federation functioned. Benjamin argued that this was not true and reiterated his perception that it was Jean-Paul's political *formation* influencing the functioning of the regional union and disrupting relations with the federation. However, overall, the informal activities organised by the union attracted participation from executive and council members and there was often wider participation of activists and members.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The findings highlight tensions in developing and sustaining participative democracy. The chapter identifies a category of activists as *leaders* of the regional union, having the most influence over the functioning of the union and over other activists. The chapter shows that the leaders were important for encouraging activist participation and developing and sustaining union organisation and identity, but that their influence in the regional union was contested by certain activists. The conflicts stemmed from the differences in approach between the 'old' and 'new' generations

of activists and between those activists seeking to maintain relations with the federation and those activists supporting the activists critical of the federation. Sainsaulieu (1999) suggests that there has been a successful marriage between the old and new generations of activists in the SUD unions and that they tend to share the same values and approach. However, this chapter shows that in practice there were tensions in the marriage between the old and new generation activists.

The chapter shows that activists frequently expressed the need and aim for a form of 'democratic unionism'. This was often presented in the context of wanting to construct a different form of unionism from that observed in the CGT and the CFDT. There were structures in place for the regular participation of activists from the sections in the form of executive and council meetings. There were conflicts between the leaders from different union sections, with arguments often against the political formation of certain activists who were perceived as dominating the functioning of the union. In executive and council meetings the key activists, and more generally, the executive members, dominated interventions, and, as discussed above, the leaders provided the main input for items discussed in the meetings. This can be related to the problems found in Pernot's (2003) work on the SUD-PTT, where she argues that there were difficulties for the union in their attempts to construct a participative form of unionism, particularly in relation to interventions. It was evident that the male members of the executive and council dominated the interventions, and Benjamin's reflection on the behaviour of union activists points to the notion of a 'masculine model of activism' prevalent in French trade unionism (Pernot, 2005). Whilst the division of female to male members was an unknown in



the union<sup>16</sup>, there appeared to be a large number of female members in the customer services and operations section. These women were under-represented in the union, particularly at the executive level and they seemed to be the representatives less likely to participate than the male members. However, the council was not completely male dominated and whilst there was less participation from women in both sets of meetings at the regional level, in observations in the female dominated section of customer services, women activists appeared to play an active role. This is demonstrated in observations discussed in Chapter 7.

There was a great deal of reflection on the practices in the union and with their interventions, Benjamin and his section provided a constant reminder to the executive and the council that there were possibilities for improving the union functioning. There were political tensions between certain activists, which appeared to underlie some of the debates taking place in the union. In the example of Philippe having his mandates to represent the regional union at the federation level withdrawn, he was considered to have acted against the democratic principles of the regional union and the council were able to introduce sanctions against him. However, the issue was complex and with the interventions of the drivers' section, we could interpret the decision to withdraw Philippe's mandates as part of the political disagreements between activists, and the problems between Jean-Paul and Louis with the federation. However the majority of council members, and the different sections agreed the motion and intervened against what they perceived to be an undemocratic practice. There were tensions observed in union meetings, with

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<sup>16</sup> This reflects a Republican practice in France of not collecting biographical data such as gender and ethnicity into account. In the local union an interpretation of this is that the common factor for activists was their identity as 'workers' rather than them being male or female for example.

activists showing frustration with the functioning of the meetings. When Jean-Paul suggested participation of works council members in the construction of congress documents, George made the comment that '*the more we are the more it doesn't work*'. It could be argued that an important part developing a form of grassroots unionism was to involve as many participants as possible in deciding on the direction of the union. However, whilst it was the union executive developing congress documents, union sections were able to propose debates for changing the strategic direction of the union.

In relation to theme of *bureaucratisation*, the regional union had rules on the lengths of positions held in the union. However, there was a fear expressed by some activists that once the 'older generation' of activists retired it would be difficult to find replacements. In the observation on the replacement of activists it appeared the executive members were cautious when replacing important positions. In the replacement of Christophe, the treasurer, a major criterion was his replacement should have a high degree of commitment and involvement, which went beyond the official role as treasurer. There was also a fear that some activists took advantage of having a position in the union. The tendency towards having more permanent officials was evidenced from George requesting that the turnover of activists in the union was changed from one month to a year. However, the monthly turnover of activists was generally maintained.



## Chapter 6: Membership and replenishment of activists

### Introduction

In Chapter 1 it was argued that a condition for union renewal is the recruitment and extension of the membership base and the replenishment of new generations of activist members. In Chapter 2 it was argued that there was little incentive to become a union member in France, particularly because of dual representation system, where workers are represented whether they are union members or not. The SUD unions have a stated aim to develop a *mass unionism*, but it has been shown that this emerging movement has perhaps reached its peak of membership growth and is showing a similar pattern of low membership and stagnation in growth levels. This chapter explores to what extent and how the regional union activists were able to build up membership and their relationship to members. Firstly, this chapter presents some of the reasons why workers became members of the regional union. The members were mainly from the two most organised sections in the regional union, customer services and operations, and cleaning. This reflects my greater involvement with activists from these union sections and the location of these members who were based mainly in train stations, and were thus more accessible. The second section explores the expectations and attitudes of regional union activists towards union members from union texts, activists' narratives and discussions in meetings. This section also looks at some of the arguments used by activists to encourage union membership. The final section looks at new member training in the

union and highlights how this was an activity to encourage members to participate in the union and to think about their interests collectively.

The chapter shows that the union's radical approach and the legal service offered appeared to be important reasons for membership and support in the regional union. In spite of explicit strategies for increasing members, the union had limited success in recruiting members on *mass*, which the activists argue can be explained by the system of dual representation and the lack of interest in unionism. It could also be explained by the high expectations of activists towards union members which may discourage workers from joining the union. However, from engaging in activities such as new member training the union appeared to have some success in making members think more about their collective interests and this can be seen as part of the union's attempt to replenish activists. This chapter presents evidence which can be linked to framing processes to encourage some level of support from members.

### **Members' reasons for joining the regional union**

There were a variety of reasons given by members for joining the regional union of SUD-Rail. In the regional union, 'new member training'<sup>17</sup> sessions were held regularly for members who had recently joined the union. In one session, the members were asked to present themselves, to explain why they had joined SUD and to talk about their experience of the union so far. The participants were all white,

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<sup>17</sup> In French: Formation nouvel adhérent.



male and between the ages of 20 and 30, and were all from the customer services and operations section. They gave the following responses:

Member 1: I have worked in signalling for 3 years...I joined SUD in 2003...when I first joined the SNCF the unions came up to me and asked me to join...I said hold on...I wanted to wait to see who I thought was best before joining...I became friends with one of the SUD DPs and joined after talking to him...I have come to the training to find out a bit more about it...I am not totally convinced since I joined...nothing has really happened with SUD...

Member 2: I was a [youth trainee] for 3 years...I have been a permanent employee for a year...I do late nights on the trains...my mum and dad are both in the SNCF and are both with SUD...

Member 3: I have been in SUD for 8 months...I had problems at work and worked with Benoit who convinced me to join...I work on the platforms at night...I want to stay working nights it suits me but they want me to change my hours...

Member 4: I have worked for the SNCF for 4 years...I have been a member for a year...I have not seen much over the last few years I have not been impressed...

The reasons for joining show the importance of having some form of link with the union, with Member 1 having become friends with one of the DPs in the union, Member 2 having family members in the union and Member 3 being in contact with Benoit at work. Member 4 did not give his reasons for being a member of the union, but he worked with Member 3 and was having the same problem with management regarding a change in hours. Several of the members from the cleaning companies were motivated to join SUD because they had offered to ‘help’ them. Kamina (Arab female, mid forties) said she had been a member of the CGT and the CFDT and they ‘could do nothing for her’. She said SUD had offered to help her with her problems with her employer and that the legal service offered by the union allowed her to have letters written for her by Sylvestre. Another cleaning worker, Mai (black female, mid thirties) said she also joined because the union had offered to help her. She was told that if she was nominated as a *délégué syndical* (DS) she would be better protected in her job. Talking about Mai, Sylvestre said to me that she was being ‘abused’ by her ‘boss’ and that he was trying to ‘move her around different stations’. Sylvestre said that now she was a member, and a nominated DS, she was ‘left alone’. Other members in the customer services and operations section said that they were better ‘defended’ with SUD, and that the union was the most ‘present’ in the workplace. One worker, who could not be a member because he was a reserve in the army, said he would have joined SUD if he was able, but he also said that they were often seen as ‘too radical’. Another member said he became a member because he always joined the union most ‘present’ in the workplace. He said he did not care which union it was and he laughed and said he had been a member of the CFTC in his last workplace, because they were the most present union in the workplace. Here



there is also the suggestion that a presence in the workplace is important for encouraging membership, more so than the union's particular identity or strategies.

### **Members' role and activist recruitment strategies**

From union texts it was evident that the regional union activists had particular expectations of members. Firstly, in the regional union statutes there was a detailed description of the relationship of members to the regional union.

#### Article 5: The member

5.1 All employees or retired employees of a company in the railway sector, having made the act of membership and being up to date with dues, are considered members.

5.2 The member is the base of the union organisation SUD-Rail. He/she holds an essential place and is invited to participate in the life of the union section and the regional union.

5.3 **Each member is invited to participate in debating and decision-making activities in the context of the union and to implement the decisions taken. (*Debate to take out this rule.*)**

5.4 **Each member, in the context of his/her establishment's union section has:**

#### **As a responsibility:**

- **To support the demands/claims formulated by the union.**
- **To inform employees about the union organisation.**

#### **As a right:**

- Information
- Training
- To state his/her point of view, position on all the problems and debates in the union.
- To participate in all the activities of the union.
- To obtain a response to all demands for information concerning notably the use of fees, the decisions taken in his/her name.

5.5           The member has total freedom of action, opinion and engagement except in radical opposition to the orientations defined by the statutes of the organisation SUD-Rail.

5.6           The member is consulted on all important decisions (action, strategy...). In this context, the union uses all means available to organise consultations. The union commits itself to presenting the consultations to members in a way to improve participation.

5.7           Each member has the right to training for new members in the first year of membership.

5.8           Each member who accepts to act and to take union responsibilities has the right to relevant training.

*(Own emphasis added)*

Article 5.3 highlighted in the text invites members to take part in decision-making. The drivers' section was responsible for putting forward the motion to take out this article. The idea of taking members out of decision making processes appears to contradict the ambition of developing a more participative form of unionism, as was discussed in Chapter 5. However, the article remained in the statutes after the



congress, suggesting that a majority of activists, at least in principle, thought membership involvement in decision-making processes and implementing decisions was important. Article 5.4 shows that the activists' held a perception of a union member as having particular 'rights' and 'responsibilities'. The responsibility to inform employees about the union in the workplace suggests that the regional union activists expected members to take on an active role for the union in their workplace. A further interpretation of this responsibility is that activists held the perception that being a union member embodied a level of commitment to the union and that the members would naturally take on responsibility of encouraging support for the union in the workplace.

There were also high expectations from the union leaders for section leaders to engage in activities for recruiting and maintaining members. In a report on the strategy of the regional union for 2004, union sections were asked to develop plans for membership. The following extract highlights what was required in the plan.

4-2-1) At least once a year at the union council the section presents a plan for development and the resources required (time off, materials etc...).

This plan integrates the following elements:

- Steps for increasing membership to the union
- Maintaining members by making the union at their service
- Inform railway workers (for SNCF sections) and employees with reliable information and quality materials.

- To be attentive to the problems and the demands of agents<sup>18</sup>
- To defend all workers in the railways whatever their status (youth employees, subcontractors, contract workers)
- Respond to all individual situations
- Involve all members of the section by involving them in all decisions (votes, general assembly etc...)
- To train members and militants in order to guarantee the next generation of militants.

4-2-2) Membership is a permanent task, not in terms of finance but because we know that it is our only force and guarantee of representative status. If we forget this statement sometimes, our bosses know to remind us regularly...It is with that in mind that after an action, a conflict or the resolution of an individual problem we go to our colleagues to propose union membership.

4-4-1) If not all members wish to go beyond simply paying their dues, it is still important to propose to each member the conduct a union tour. The union tour is the real basic training of new members...allows us to include the new member in militant activity.

From this extract it is evident that activists were expected to recruit members and to encourage existing members to become more involved in the union. Even where members are not interested in being more involved than paying membership fees the executive suggests that activists propose activities for members to become more involved. In addition it appears that the activists perceived that an important space

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<sup>18</sup> Workers were often referred to using the term 'agent' in French.



for recruiting workers was during periods of actions or when individual problems had been resolved. The activists recognised the limitations of their efforts to encourage new workers to become members. Gerard related the lack of interest of new workers in unionism to the wider economic context:

...new workers coming into the SNCF...they are often just happy to have found a job...are not interested in unionism...when workers look around and see unemployment and see that they have a job...they want to keep their job....this is an aspect of unionism too...

With new workers being aware of unemployment levels and being happy to have found a job they were less responsive to the arguments for becoming a member. This suggests that there were limitations to the recruitment work undertaken to encourage membership, which were outside the regional union activists' control. It also demonstrates the activist's perception that issues outside the immediate work context were considered an important influence on decisions to become a member of the union. Related to decisions on becoming a member Patrick spoke about a limit to the activists' arguments for recruiting members:

...it is difficult at first to attract members because when we say we will protect them they say that the unions protect them anyway so why pay the subscription...I tell them that it is important to have members to show that the union is strong against the employer...the employer may say to us that we are not representative of workers...

The workers' arguments for not becoming a member appear to be a reflection of the workplace representative system, where the unions represented workers whether they were members or not. The counter argument used by Patrick was to justify membership in relation to showing the strength of the union against the employer. This shows that the Patrick recognised the need to develop different arguments to encourage union membership. However, in general recruiting members was perceived as a difficult task. In one observation where Marie was in the staffroom of her workplace section, a work colleague came in and she said that she would get the membership form out for him to sign. Her colleague laughed and said 'no not now'. Marie responded by saying to me that he had been making the same response for two years.

A common theme in executive meetings was the lack of interest of members. Some activists suggested that members were not interested in unionism because of the type of unionism that had been offered to them for such a long time by the CGT and the CFDT. These unions were often described by executive members as being 'bureaucratic union machines' who had discouraged workers away from unionism. However, in spite of this attitude, there was a tension in activists' relations with members. The lack of interest of members was often brought up in relation to the agenda item of 'information sent to members'. This was brought up in the written agenda of the executive meetings on two occasions when the executive were deciding to which groups they should send tracts. In preparing for the regional union congress the activists discussed this issue:



Jean-Paul: ...we need to send out a tract with all the proposed changes to the statutes and the report of activity to all members before the congress...

George: ...that will be too expensive...

Jean-Paul: ...yes the members do not give a damn anyway...

George: ...we will be doing a special newsletter for them...

On another occasion, in relation to treasury issues Christophe said:

...there is too much information sent out unnecessarily...the members do not give a damn...

This suggests a degree of frustration from some of the executive and the perception that members did not 'give a damn'<sup>19</sup>. However, during another meeting Christophe argued that the fault of member disinterest was a 'culture of written communication', which had developed in the union.

Christophe: ...Jacques and others have a method of working which privileges written communication...

David: I agree...having a chat with railway workers<sup>20</sup> can be worth more than four pages of tract...

Louis: ...yes we need more oral communication...

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<sup>19</sup> The French verbs used in the instances of talking about members were 'ficher' and 'foutre'.

<sup>20</sup> The conversation was on union members, but it was difficult to make out who activists were referring to at times as they would switch interchangeably between the terms for members ('adhérents'), railway workers (cheminots), 'agents', friends ('copains'/'copines'), and comrades (camarades).

Some activists also held the perception that members were not interested in issues outside the workplace. For example, in an executive meeting where Jacques was talking about a campaign to support farmers who had destroyed genetically modified crops, Michel, a newly appointed member of the executive following the retirement of Louis, said.

Michel: ...we never discuss these broader issues in the workplace...it is difficult to broaden the debate in the workplace...the members are not often aware of the debates...at section level we talk about problems in the workplace...

Jacques: ...it is because the members do not give a damn about the current debates...

Michel: ...no it is maybe because they are not aware of them...

This shows that there was a disjuncture between the issues discussed in the regional union and those discussed in the workplace. The different perceptions of activists are interesting in that what Jacques perceived as members not caring about debates, was challenging by an activist more present at the workplace claiming that members were simply not aware of the broader issues being discussed in the regional union.

During meetings and in conversations the activists often reflected on ability of the union to recruit and represent members. This type of reflection was particularly evident after the workplace elections. The union executive distributed the following text to activists:



Our representativeness is still growing at the national level, now we are the 2nd union organisation in the SNCF with 15.52 % of the votes in the elections on 25 March 2004...after only 8 years in existence, this proves the necessity of continuing on our path to build the type of unionism...necessary in class struggle....

However today we are aware that mobilisation of railway workers and employees more generally and activism and membership within a union are more and more difficult. We must ask ourselves the question why people are leaving the union world, at a time when the world of social movements acting outside the workplace seems to be progressing.

Whilst our constant progression at the national level, as much in the number of members as in the number of votes at elections, justifies the choices we have made, we must stay vigilant and attentive to the demands and the expressed needs of railway workers, in order to remain a force for propositions that we have been since the beginning.

The regional union, one of the founders of SUD-Rail, 2nd union organisation in the region with 28.15% of the votes in the last elections and 790 [sic] members, has always shown in its practices, its demands and its action, its resolution to hold to its engagements with regard to its members and railway workers, as much in relation to strategies...as to the rules of functioning and disseminating information.

In the 3 years since our last congress...in June 2001, the regional union has been rich in demands and actions aimed at defending our enterprise and public services, working conditions, buying power and our pensions.

This text shows that activists were concerned with the direction that the union was taking and that there was an awareness of the problems of mobilising and recruiting members and workers. An interesting reflection is made on the relevance of trade unions in recognising that other social movements are perceived to be progressing, where as individuals are leaving unionism. The stress of being vigilant in representing the 'expressed needs' of workers can be interpreted as an important strategy for demonstrating the relevance of the union to workers. This indicates that the union, in principle, valued the interests of workers and was concerned to avoid speaking for workers.

### **Training of new members**

An important activity in relation to members in the regional union was the training for new members. Here I present a detailed account of a training session that took place in the regional union. During the year 2004 the union had planned for three sessions of 'new member training'. The regional union offered this training to give members the chance to 'learn' about the union. The new member training could be interpreted as having another aim, which was to encourage members into thinking of the collective issues in the workplace and to become more involved in the union organisation. The training took place over a day and was taken by Benjamin. Benjamin said to me that the reason he was chosen for the training was because he



was also new to unionism. He introduced himself to the participants by saying that joining SUD-Rail in 1996 had been his first experience of unionism. He said that he joined because 'SUD-rail corresponded with how he thought a union should function'<sup>21</sup>. Benoit sat in on the session, but did not participate. He told Benjamin at the beginning that over 20 people were expected for the session, but only four were present. All four members were from Benoit's union section. Firstly on seeing the number of participants for the training session Benjamin said to the members:

...the turnout for this is the first sign of the problem of unionism in France...the problem we have is not the lack of members but motivating our own members to participate...

Benjamin was thus openly critical of the lack of participation of members and related the issue to broader problems in French trade unionism. The subjects covered during the training were: the image of railway workers and public services; the history of unionism; the role of the works council and the DP; the organisation of the union; problems with the pensions system. Benjamin started by talking about the image of railway workers held by the general public:

...they see workers who just want to keep their acquired rights<sup>22</sup>...but we have kept the economy going...and we have an organisation where workers are permanent and have good salaries...the trade union is a counterweight to the

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<sup>21</sup> Looking back to the discussion in Chapter 5 this is an interesting point, as Benjamin was the most critical of the way the union was run.

<sup>22</sup> 'Aquis sociaux' in French

forces against public services...look at the examples of England and Germany...the railways have changed and it is not for the good...

The second area was a history of unionism and of the workers movement. The participants had a handout of the chronology of the workers movement dating from the revolution. Benjamin went through some of the dates but focused mainly on the more recent history of union organisation.

...the government had two genius ideas...one of the ideas was the representative status given to unions in 1966 which even now has not changed....this means that the CGT can exist with no members....the CFTC who now represent nothing can sign agreements that no one else agrees with...the second idea was allowing unions to assist in the management of social security and benefits...trade unionists were put in offices given chauffeurs...great for unionism...SUD does not want to become like that...does not want to send activists to manage social security...then we will become like the others...

Benjamin talked about the union hierarchy and drew a diagram of the union organisation on the white board. Members were at the top of the diagram and Benjamin said that *'we work on the basis that it is the members at the top'*. Benjamin seemed to want to stress the importance of membership participation and the problems that could occur if members did not participate.



...it is important for members to participate when there is a vote or survey at the workplace... it is horrible when there is only a 12/13 per cent response rate...I like to do surveys often as I like to know I have got support behind me...everything that happens for your future in the SNCF goes through the union...it is the union that discusses all the important subjects with the bosses...

...the general assembly is for making democratic decisions...this can be a problem though as members do not turn up...this is taken as a lack of support for the strike...but we have been mistaken before when the general assembly was not well attended and there was support for the strike...

...participation and democracy at the workplace is when the union struggle is great...and everyone can express themselves this is the best moment for the struggle...

The union section was presented as the next layer of organisation in the union. In discussing the union section Benjamin said:

...the sections have meetings once or twice a year...it is too expensive for them to meet more often...the CGT have more resources to work so they can have more meetings...

The regional council and the executive were presented as the next stages. Benjamin said there was no reason why any of the members could not take part in the council.

...we do not have a very bureaucratic structure with many layers like the other unions...we must stay close to the rank and file...

Benjamin can be seen to be actively encouraging greater involvement of members. The members were given a tour of the union office and introduced to key activists, including the treasurer, who explained his role and how their membership fees were spent. Christophe told the members that their money was spent on providing computers and other office materials. Christophe showed the members the union journal and pointed out the cartoons in the journal. Christophe said that this was a way of making the journal more 'fun'. He said that if the members were good at drawing they could draw cartoons for the regional union journal. In the morning Benjamin had said that they would all eat together at lunchtime. At lunchtime three of the members said they had made other plans. Benjamin responded by saying that they always tried to eat together in the union, as it was 'nice' and 'social'. One of the members stayed for lunch. Benjamin introduced him to other activists as they came in to the office to have lunch. Introducing the new member to other activists appeared to be an important activity to Benjamin. He was particularly keen for the new member to meet Jean-Paul and Louis, and told him that they were the founders of the union. This can be seen as part of the activists' work to help encourage the new member to feel involved in the union. This also provides an interesting observation on the relations between Benjamin, Jean-Paul and Louis developed in Chapter 5. In spite of Benjamin's issues with the involvement of Jean-Paul and Louis in the union there was recognition of their importance in the union.



After the lunch session the training continued with an explanation of the works council and the role of the DP. In relation to the running of the works council he said that it was:

...run mainly by the CGT...they have a canteen...one run by the works council...this means that there are trade unionists who are bosses...that's something that SUD-rail is against...if we became majority we would stop the canteen...it is awful anyway...

Benjamin spoke about union actions and how the activists had occupied the last works council meeting in a protest over a plan for reorganisation for 53 workers in the region. In relation to the role of DP he said:

...it is very time-consuming...if there is a DP you do not see it means they are doing something else...they only have two days every month to do the work...to prepare the questions for the DP meeting and then do the report...

Benjamin said that the main role of the DP was to get questions for the meetings with management and to give out strike notices, which need to be given to management 5 days in advance. He said that the DP was responsible for organising general assemblies to decide whether strikes should go ahead and whether they should continue. The DP role was thus interpreted by Benjamin as going beyond its official activities of representing individual grievances to management. This reflects the blurring of representative and union roles, where activists were expected to engage in union and representative activities. This is developed further in Chapter 7.

The final subject covered in the training session was how 'capitalism' affected public service and pensions. Benjamin used the example of 'clothes pegs' being made in the early stages of capitalism and explained how businesses first functioned. He showed the difference between 'communist' and 'capitalist' societies by referring to 'profit' and explained that:

...employers wanted to sell their clothes pegs at a cheaper price...they made the workers work harder...then shares needed to increase and the situation became crazy<sup>23</sup>...

Benjamin related this to the issue of retirement and pensions. He said that there were two ways to deal with pensions, the first being where active workers pay for pensioners, and the second being through 'capitalisation', where workers take out private pension schemes. He said that the second option used shares and speculation and that:

...if this was to happen we would find ourselves in an American or English situation...in the United States they have not got a sou<sup>24</sup>...we are coming to a situation like this...we are creating the poor of the future...old poor pensioners...look at the example of Enron...the company went bankrupt...people who had worked there for 40 years had nothing at retirement...not a sou...this is the problem of using capitalisation for

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<sup>23</sup> The French word used here was 'délire'. The translation is difficult but the meaning in the context could be translated as 'crazy' or 'mad'.

<sup>24</sup> The French word here is 'sou' which is a slang term for cash, pennies (sous)



pensions...the government has said it will decrease public contributions and increase capitalisation...this is not yet in the SNCF but they want to introduce the system...

The members responded to this explanation saying:

Member 4: If it had been explained to us like this there would have been a lot more support for the actions against the change last year...

Member 3: If my mates had heard this there would have been a real action against it...

This could be interpreted as Benjamin achieving a degree of success in the arguments put forward to explain the problem of pensions. Throughout the training session Benjamin was engaged in encouraging members to develop a sense of wider issues. Benjamin talked about issues beyond the workplace level, which could be seen as an attempt to widen the members' perceptions of issues relating to the workplace.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The majority of activists held the conception of members as playing an active role in the union. Equally activists perceived their own role as being one of actively encouraging members to become more involved in the union to 'train' the next generation of activists. From the union statutes and from the narratives of activists the role of the union member was perceived as important forming in the 'basis for union democracy'. However, some activists held the perception that union members

were not interested in the activities of the regional union, and in the issues outside the workplace. From the evidence, this could be interpreted as a lack of communication about wider issues to the members, rather than the assumption that the members were not interested in these issues. Also, in member training, it showed that the members were receptive when being told about the wider context of issues.

The evidence suggests that activists had difficulties in recruiting members. A reason given by workers was that they were already ‘protected’ through workplace representative institutions. This made the task of encouraging workers to become members difficult, and an argument used to encourage membership was that the union needed members to show its ‘force’ against management. Yet it could be argued that there was a *free rider* problem in the workplace, where it was not necessary for workers to become a member when there was a group of activists willing to organise collectively to protect their interests. Another problem experienced by one activist was that the wider economic context was not conducive to member recruitment. The evidence in this chapter is limited to only a few examples and the examples are mainly the perceptions of the activists, so it is difficult to assess the extent of different reasons used for not becoming a member of the union. The reasons for becoming a member were varied but it appeared that a union presence in the workplace and having some form of link with the regional union were important. For the privatised cleaning workers membership was linked to the help that the union offered them and to being better protected if they became a member.



It could be interpreted that the activists viewed the recruitment of workers and eventually the training for members as a way of enrolling future activists rather than for building a 'mass membership'. The new and existing members were targets for becoming more involved in the union. The union strategy was specifically to 'train members...in order to guarantee the next generation of militants'. This highlights a fear of union activists that there was a need to actively encourage members to become involved in the union, as there were problems experienced in encouraging new membership and member participation. The comments made by Benjamin in relation to the lack of participation in new member training are telling in this regard. The content and conduct of the training session for new members is an important observation in terms of showing how activists sought to encourage members to become involved in the regional union. Benjamin suggested that there was no reason why the members could not participate in the union council and other activists sought to put across a positive image of the union to the members.

The activists lamented the lack of participation and interest of members in the regional union. However, looking at this evidence in conjunction with the previous chapter would suggest that tensions would be greater if there was increased participation. There was thus a dilemma for the activists. There appeared to be the need to encourage workers and members to become involved in the union in order to train up a new generation of activists. Yet, at the same time there were difficulties in the conduct of union meetings, the greater the participation. In addition, the comment made by Michel on the lack of communication with workers, suggests that there was a level of distance maintained by the activists. Furthermore, in saying that members were apathetic it could be argued that the activists sought to redefine their

roles as 'activists'. Through claiming that members were not interested in being involved in the union, an interpretation is that the activists were able to reinforce and justify their place and activities in the regional union.

In general few activities focused specifically on membership recruitment, and other than new member training, members were infrequently involved in the regional union. However, as the observations were based mainly at the level of the regional union and not the section levels, the activities and involvement of members may be underestimated in this account. An important issue to take into account is the perceptions of the importance of members involvement held by union activists. For activists it could be interpreted that members were, in theory, guaranteed votes in workplace elections and thus were not necessarily as important a target as other worker constituents. The fact that all worker constituents were the union's audience for workplace elections meant that the regional union activists sought to represent a wider set of interests outside their membership base. Other than showing the 'force' of the union to management, there was little interest for the regional union to foster a form of unionism of representing members' direct interests. This was because in order to maintain union organisation, it was to the potential advantage of the activists to try to represent the interests of as many of their worker constituents as possible. Some activists perceived that votes in workplace elections were more important than membership density and that qualitative factors and election support were prioritised in cases for gaining representative status. Thus, having a membership base was not considered a fundamental criterion for union organisation and votes in workplace elections and elected representative were considered to carry more weight than membership numbers.



## Chapter 7: Developing and maintaining links with workers

### Introduction

In Chapter 1 a strong workplace engagement was put forward as one of the conditions for union renewal. In Chapter 2 it was argued that there has been a tendency towards an institutionalised form of trade unionism in France and that unions have been increasingly taken up with institutional duties, creating a distance from the workers they are supposed to represent (Rosanvallon, 1988). The evidence is mixed, however, with empirical workplace studies showing that activists tend to go beyond their institutionalised role (Dufour and Hege, 2002). The SUD unions have the stated aim of avoiding an institutionalised form of unionism and have a strategy of maintaining close links with workers. However, there are strong pressures and incentives for developing the union's institutional position and existing evidence (Denis, 2003) and the evidence from previous chapters show that the SUD union have invested in the institutional sphere and developed legal expertise to maintain and advance union organisation. In the context of the constraints, this chapter considers to what extent and how the regional union activists were able to develop and maintain links with workers and to encourage a sense of collective interests and identity. The first section looks at the regional union activists' perceptions of the roles of representative institutions. Secondly, the chapter presents the regional union training of newly elected representatives. The third section describes the practices of 'union rounds' in the workplace. The fourth section

considers the ways in which union competition affected the union's practice in the workplace. The final section considers to what extent the regional union was able to maintain a turnover of worker representatives.

### **Role of representative institutions**

This section looks at the regional union activists' perception of the roles of the two main worker representative bodies, the CE and the DP. The regional union produced written information on the responsibilities of activists in the various positions. The following extract relates specifically to the DP role:

DPs are chosen from lists organised by the union section. Once elected, they have the responsibility to participate in section meetings and are the instigators for action in their section. They manage union tours and are responsible for looking after members, tracking dues and diffusing information to all workplaces in their section (Each section will verify that an activist or a representative is in contact with each member).

This extract shows that the activists attached a level of responsibility to the DP role, which was beyond the official role of representing workers individual interests to management. The responsibility included 'looking after members', 'collecting dues' and 'diffusing information'. Their role was also to be 'instigators for action', which could be interpreted as representatives needing to play a major role in the mobilisation of their constituents. One of the responsibilities of the representatives was to write reports on the outcome of representative meetings. The reports were



written at the regional union office and distributed to all worker constituents. The DP produced a report directed at section level constituents. The strategy report for the regional union demonstrates the importance attributed to the reports for the DP and CHSCT:

Section tracts: conforming to our statutes each delegation (DP and CHSCT) must release a tract report. The executive and the council make sure this practice is maintained and help sections that are not able to do it. At all times the report needs to highlight the union's position...

This demonstrates that the executive were keen to encourage activists to maintain the practice of writing reports and to go beyond reporting the outcomes of the meeting. A role of the report was also to 'highlight the union's position. In the DP reports the activists from the regional union appear to set their identity as one in opposition both to management and to the CGT with overt criticism of management and the CGT. There was an important ideological dimension to the reports where the activists would frame the decisions and outcomes of meetings using political references. The practice of putting forward the union's position was also evidenced in the reports for the CE. For the CE the three unions represented (CGT, SUD-Rail, UNSA) each produced their own report on the outcomes of the works council meetings. The regional union CE representatives (Jacques, Benjamin and Jean-Paul) wrote the meeting report, which was in the style of a brochure and called 'Luttes sociales', translated as 'industrial struggles'. The title of the report was itself significant with the term of 'struggle' used to emphasise the regional union's class based perception of their activity. In regional union statutes it stated that as well as a report 'Luttes

sociales' should be a 'tract of agitation'. It was evident from the following extract in the run up to the workplace elections that the representatives used the CE reports as a space for forwarding the union's position.

### Role of a CE

The role of the regional CE is not only limited to organising social activities, but is also concerned with wider domains of activity, in particular, the state of the economy and the enterprise.

In effect, the issues of employment, work organisation, professional training, working conditions, economic productivity indicators, etc... are strategic elements on which the regional CE must intervene.

The regional CE is also, like the other representative institutions (DP, CHSCT), a tool:

- for demands
- for propositions
- for struggles [luttres]

for all employees.

This can be seen as part of the regional union work towards framing the union's identity, and disseminating their conception of workplace institutions as 'a tool' for 'demands' and 'struggles'. As well as providing information on the outcome of CE meetings, the regional union used the CE reports to talk about problems concerning how the CE was currently run. The activists' attitudes towards the representative institutions appeared to be influenced by the CGT majority control over the works council. The regional union had a limited influence over the running of the CE as the



CGT was the majority union. In reports over a six-month period SUD-Rail regional union activists often criticised decisions made by the CE and the general direction taken by the body. In reports in the run-up to elections, the CE was presented as ineffective and the regional union proposed their own methods of functioning if they were to become the majority union. The regional union's description of the 'role' of a CE representative was as follows:

#### Role of a CE elected [representative]

The elected representatives of SUD-Rail, more concerned with defending the interests of railway workers and the public railway service, than wasting time on sterile talking, frequently intervene aggressively against management – often supported by agents engaged in struggle who are sometimes invited to CE sessions.

The negative opinions, put forward by the elected [representatives] are rarely taken into account by the management. There again, it is collective action that pays.

There is an implicit criticism of other CE representatives in the description in the idea that other representatives 'waste time on sterile talking'. The regional union activists often expressed frustration with the role of the body and meetings. A more direct criticism from regional union activists was to do with the CE's involvement in running the workplace canteens. Sylvestre highlighted that the CGT representatives in the CE were 'bosses' when talking about their aim for the next election. Sylvestre said to me:

...the CGT are the majority in the works council...they have the power in running the works council...in the next elections we are aiming to have an equal number of seats or even a majority...we would change the running of the council...first of all the canteen...which is run by the works council...can you believe that trade unionists are bosses...the works council pays for the canteen but only pays the workers the minimum wage...the workers have even been on strike against the works council...

Sylvestre and other activists attributed blame to the CGT for the poor working conditions of canteen workers. In election propaganda the regional union reported this issue back to the constituents.

#### CE personnel

Elected, but not boss! Since the creation of SUD Rail, we have always shown, through numerous actions, our solidarity with the CE personnel.

Today the regional CE employs around 80 employees. 80 workers who have legitimate demands and are making them known.

If SUD Rail becomes majority in the regional CE, it will make choices on certain services offered.

SUD Rail will work together with the CE personnel, without changing hats.

We are above all trade unionists and we will stay [trade unionists].

The regional union activists sought to highlight the contradictory position of the CGT's role of 'boss' of CE personnel. This propaganda was produced for the



workplace elections, at a time of heightened union competition, where the regional union sought to gain support from workers.

### **Training representatives**

All newly elected representatives undertook training for their new role, during which the executive members encouraged new representatives to highlight the union's position to workers and to maintain close links with constituents. A frequent activity held in the regional union was the 'training' for elected representative positions. The extract below shows the sessions offered by the regional union and the aims presented in the strategy report of the regional union:

- 4-4-2) Training of elected representatives: Elected DPs, CHSCTs, CEs need to reflect regularly on their role, to take stock of new laws and regulations, and to share their experiences.
- Each year, elected DPs participate in a session dedicated to the subject of grading.
  - Each newly elected DP participates in a two-day training on their role.
  - Every four years the elected CHSCT benefit from 5 days of training
  - The elected CE representatives meet each year over two days preferably in September and in March.

There was a disagreement in the executive meeting as to the timing of the training session for new DP representatives and the ways in which DPs should learn about their role. Jacques proposed to have the training as soon as possible after the elections. Jean-Paul said he disagreed with the idea of having training for the new representatives so soon. He said they should wait three months so that the new representatives had time to learn ‘in practice’. Jean-Paul said they should give the new representatives three months to make mistakes and have training in September (à la rentrée). Jean-Paul complained that most of the new representatives ‘knew nothing’ about the role, and ‘did not know what to say in meetings’. He said that Sylvestre and Marie were two examples. However, Jacques proposed that the training sessions for DPs were held in the month after the elections, and Jean-Paul agreed. George took the training sessions<sup>25</sup> for new DPs where there were 11 participants for the first session, and 18 for the second. The majority of new representatives worked in customer service and operations, which had the highest number of newly elected representatives. Some of the participants were already involved in the regional union executive or council (Sylvestre, Helene and Marie), but most were more involved at the section level. The training session included the activists for the DP titleholder and the ‘substitutes’. Talking about the positions George said that:

...all activists are considered a DP regardless of whether they are substitute or titleholder...

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<sup>25</sup> As with the new member training, Benoit was present. After him being present at these two sessions, I interpreted his presence as part of his own training to be able to take the sessions in the regional union.



George also described the expectations for the role:

...if you are a DP you are DP for the whole establishment not just for your section...if someone wants to be represented they can be represented by anyone...even those from different grades...

...some DPs say they are not on union time so they are not dealing with union issues...this has got to stop...

George talked about the importance of workplace 'union rounds'<sup>26</sup>:

...union rounds are an important job...you should always think about collecting question for the DP meetings...the best formula is to go round in twos and try and make it mixed rounds...change around the person you go with...

...make sure you present yourself...say you are a DP and what union you are with...sometimes you can leave a workplace and they do not know who you are or which trade union you are from...

...there are no set hours for rounds...it depends on your workplace...you need to know your workplace...it is often appreciated if you do tours nights and mornings...

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<sup>26</sup> 'Union rounds' are defined and discussed later in the chapter.

In relation to union rounds in the run-up to the workplace elections one of the participants said:

...it is difficult to convince people to vote SUD it is a force when the workplace is CGT and will always be CGT...

George replied:

it is doable...it is done little by little...even when it is difficult you should do tours where SUD do not have any votes where it is completely CGT...in maintenance SUD had 84 per cent of the vote but they managed to get an extra 4 per cent more of the vote by force..there are even some CGT members who vote for SUD in the elections...I know there are two from my section...it is always worth doing rounds...

The representatives were given a sheet with a list of what they should carry with them at all times, the 'representative's backpack' (le sac à dos du délégué). The list of items activists were expected to carry with them were: the union tract or bulletin to hand out; reports from works council or health and safety meetings on the latest events; a file with the union statutes; human resource rules/procedures; table of allowances and benefits; union welcome brochure and guides to maternity, paternity and disabled workers; an address book; membership form and rates of fees; diaries; posters, pins and adhesive tape; union stickers; DP card; and yellow safety belt. George said it was important to have read the latest tract and to always have copies. even when not on union duty. The grading charts were also important as this meant



that representatives were aware of when their colleagues had been graded. He said that managers forgot grading levels so it was important for DPs to be aware.

DP meetings were held every two months and the length of the meetings varied depending on the section. The majority of the meetings took place over one day but in the most organised section in the union the meeting was spread over two days.

...in [customer services and operations in the outlying districts] the meeting lasts over two days...this is the only section in France where this happens...before some meetings finished at 1 or 2 in the morning so they decided to change the meeting to 2 days...

In training on the DP meetings George described how the activists should prepare for meetings and how to act within them. He encouraged the activists to intervene in the meeting and criticised the practice of the CGT where only one representative from the delegation of DPs intervened in the meetings. He said that one of his friends from the CGT had not spoken in a DP meeting in 4 years, and he found this practice peculiar and specific to the CGT. He told them to watch and be attentive in meetings as they were good training. The main points for representatives were for them to be well prepared, to know the rules and procedures and to find the right questions. He said:

...you need to find the right question and the right question for me is always the question against...the meetings can be stressful...if the boss knows you are prepared they crack and say yes...we put pressure on the employers...that

is why we gain...the aim of the bosses is how do we stop them getting money...you need to put a lot of pressure on the bosses...I knew a boss who was traumatised before going into a DP meeting...you have an obligation to be respectful...not that I do not want to piss off the bosses...but we need to be careful...

For George, the meetings appeared to be more about adopting an adversarial position towards management, than about the issues that were being brought to the meetings. George also encouraged activists to develop negative stereotypes of management.

New DP:...what difference should we make between bosses that have worked their way up from the rank-and-file and those who come from university...

George: ...none...it does not make a difference...we have got one who came from the rank-and-file and he is the worst we have had...he is crafty...

New DP:...that was how he got to be boss I imagine...

He also discussed the reason for his negative attitude towards management.

...when I first arrived in the SNCF I was nicer... I thought the boss was right...now after many years they have proved the opposite....now I am less nice...with 25 years in the railways I see that every year is peculiar and that they cannot do this or that...

George was critical of section managers and he said that management responses in meetings were 'terrible'. George also talked about questions for the meetings and



said that the requirements were for representatives to submit the questions to management 48 hours before the meeting. He said that the CGT respected the conditions and submitted their questions 7 days in advance but that 'the responses are bad whether they get the questions 7 days before or 48 hours before'. A common response from management on DP issues seemed to be that they were unable to deal with issues as it was outside their jurisdiction. This was the case with grading issues, where activists put forward claims for employees to pass to higher grading levels, but management argued that quotas for grade change were decided upon at a different level of management. A large proportion of issues brought up in meetings were concerned with errors in pay, and George said that they often found money for workers.

In all training sessions activists often referred new representatives to the Labour Code as a resource to force management to respect union and representative rights in the workplace. George focused on showing activists the ways in which they could fully exploit the legislation available to them. George discussed the time resources available to DPs as set out in the 'Code de travail'.

...DPs have an allocated number of hours to carry out their work...this is only for the titleholder...the Labour Code states that representatives have 15 hours per month which is roughly two days...the Code actually specifies 30 hours bi-monthly using the months April and May as the baseline months...it is important to say 15 hours rather than two days as work days can be different lengths...substitutes can use the hours of the titleholder when the

titleholder is ill...we can also cheat on the hours sometimes...that sometimes works....

Representatives were made aware of the various rights that they could impose in the workplace. In looking at the health and safety representative role, George highlighted that the allocation of time resources was ambiguous. The role was officially allocated 10-12 hours a month but the labour code states that representatives can use the number of hours needed to carry out duties relating to the role:

...if you use 60 hours the boss will probably protest...some bosses are quick to protest about the number of hours you have used but they would have to get the labour inspector to come and deal with the issue...you have to be careful as the boss will assume you have cheated...Louis had an accident years ago and he carried out an enquiry for a year over it...this meant he did not work for a year...the boss did not protest at first...he was paid normally...there were problems later though...anyway the problem for the boss is that there are not enough labour inspectors<sup>27</sup>...means they only call them in when we have really pissed them off...

The limit for asking for time off for DP duties was 24 hours in advance but George said that they could:

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<sup>27</sup> Name given to the established civil servants belonging to the Labour Inspectorate. At enterprise and establishment level, the labour inspector is the official who has direct dealings with enterprise managers, unions and workforce representatives and employees. Alongside the labour inspectors, there are employment inspectors who are empowered to perform the same functions; in practice, responsibilities are allocated between the two on the basis of the size of enterprises (EMIRE).



...put in hours on Sunday to have time off on the Monday evening...we have the right to do that...they will just have to manage...

George said that activists needed to know the 'human resources rules' to know what other 'absences' they could have. He used the example of being called to a DP meeting by management:

...you are on service from when you leave home until when you get home...for example if you have to be in a meeting in [outlying district] by 9 o'clock...think what time you have to leave... the number of hours you will be doing depends on where you live...think that you are on the employer's time...if you need to leave at 7.50 in the morning...you start your day at 7.50 full-time...you may get the small crafty bosses who will question your hours...if the meeting is from 9 in the morning until 6 in the evening your hours are 11 hours 40 minutes...from 7.50 until 19.30...and if your train is late back you have the right to a second meal...whenever the meeting is called by a boss it is him who releases you...

In each workplace section there was a 'union information hour' held once every two months. It was an important forum for collecting questions for DP meetings. George explained how they could make use of the law to impose time-off for workers if they were unable to attend these meetings:

...the workers have an hour during their work time once every two months for the union information hour...there are posts where workers are not allowed to be absent from their post so they cannot attend an information hour...if they cannot attend throughout the year they are entitled to recuperate a day...once it reaches five information hours that the worker has missed they can take a day off...it is the union's responsibility to impose this and the day that can be recuperated...if you do not claim then nothing happens...we need to use the law...some DPs do not use their rights...this means if you work in [station in Paris where SUD was weak] your rights are not respected because the union is weak...rights are respected when unions do their work...

Drawing on the Labour Code was particularly important for the representatives of the private sector cleaning workers. For a training session specifically for representatives in the cleaning section, Sylvestre made the activists aware of the legislation in relation to issues of safety and making sure managers adhered to the requirement of the legislation in place. Whilst talking to DPs for the cleaning section Sylvestre commented that:

...it is important to be a DP as you can argue with the boss and you are protected by the law...even so they will do anything to get rid of you...some DPs crack up and they try in all ways to make you crack...

Sylvestre made frequent references to how the cleaning activists could use labour inspectors to enforce the labour code:



...you need to be aware of the ['delit d'entrave'<sup>28</sup>]...a labour inspector will not intervene if someone has not been paid their allowance for Sunday working but if the employer has not provided a report from questions asked in the DP meeting then he will intervene...it is up to representatives to contact the inspector...

...in July and August the boss might say you cannot have a works council meeting because he is on holiday...you tell him to nominate someone...the meeting has to take place...if not you call in the labour inspector...

...there is an important right to know about which is the right to withdraw from work ['droit de retrait'<sup>29</sup>]...the boss cannot just do anything...if you are in a dangerous work situation you have the right to stop...you do not have the right to go home but you can stop and go to the canteen or go to sleep in your car...leave your phone on in case the boss calls...I work in different stations replacing people who are not there and I worked where there was a broken door so I stopped working and said I would call in the labour inspector unless they fixed it...it was health and safety...all employees have the right and it is important...

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<sup>28</sup> Protection under criminal law against interference with trade union activities and representatives is a fundamental aspect of French labour law. The rules governing the establishment and functioning of the institutions of employee representation within the enterprise all carry penal sanctions. Interference with the creation of representative bodies, interference with the free selection of their members, interference with their functioning or with exercise of the right to organize collectively: these offences, covering what is termed elsewhere anti-union behaviour, have been the subject of a considerable body of case law specifying the extent of the rights of employee representatives (EMIRE).

<sup>29</sup> Since 1982, statutorily recognized right of employees, when they have good reason to believe that some condition at work poses a serious and imminent danger to their life or health, to stop work without incurring any penalty or deduction from pay (EMIRE).

A DP spoke to Sylvestre about a case of a colleague who was working with harmful substances without a mask. Sylvestre told him to inform his colleague to stop working and that he should refuse to work until he had the right equipment for the job. An aim of these sessions was therefore to make activists aware of legislation of the rights available to workers and the ways of imposing these rights. In general the activists saw this as the union's responsibility as management would not respect or even be aware of workers rights. The following sections present the observations from representative rounds. The aim is to explore how the activists used their 'training' and 'expertise' in their roles as worker representatives.

### **Practices of union rounds**

The main activity linking the union activists to the workplace was the 'union round' (*tourn e syndicale*). The term of 'union round' is important, as this was the name given to all rounds of the workplace, whether they were based on collecting questions for meetings with DP meetings (representative role), or for mobilising constituents for action (union role). Union rounds took place once a month, but were held more frequently before strikes or other actions, and during certain periods, for example, in the lead up to the workplace elections. Union rounds were considered more or less important depending on the nature of work activity. Jacques said that:

...the importance of militants depends on the section...in the customer services section where they work in the ticket offices they have less time for union discussions...militants have to take time off to talk to workers but in



maintenance where they work in teams there are more ongoing discussions about unionism....militants can discuss unionism through work activity...

This section focuses on the union rounds in the largest union section, customer service and operations, representing over 1600 workers and 292 members. This union section provided the main pool of activists and representative positions for the regional union. During the rounds the activists visited two types of workplaces and employees. The first type of worker was customer-facing and based in ticket offices either in stations or in town centres. A first point to note in relation to activists in the workplace is that they had a complete freedom of movement in the workplace. On a union round with the head of the union section, Benoit, and Gerard, who was a ticket office employee, the activists argued that it was important to make the effort to visit workers in these workplaces. Gerard said that:

...in the SNCF it is all about the business...they are setting up more and more shops based in shopping centres or in towns...this is taking away work from the stations and ticket offices...it is a way of dividing workers and splitting them from the stations...they are even getting rid of employees and replacing them with automatic ticket machines...soon it will be by phone internet or shops that you will buy your ticket rather than the ticket offices in stations...

The second type of worker was employed in signalling and traffic circulation. These workers were based in depots along the railway tracks or signalling boxes either along the tracks or in stations. The tours were normally conducted in pairs of activists and were held over one or two days each month. The rounds involved the union activists visiting as many workplaces and seeing as many workers as possible

in their section in the time available. In sections with fewer elected representatives the rounds were carried out on a more ad hoc basis, with time resources coming mainly from the union rather than from resources from elected positions. These sections were not as free to organise as well-resourced sections. Activists on union rounds who did not have time resources from elected positions were given union vouchers by the head of section.

The activists carried out union rounds to pick up questions for DP and CHSCT meetings. In general these took place in the week before these meetings. There was sometimes a blurring of the role however, as some activists had the role of both of DP and health and safety, they often collected issues for both types of meetings on the rounds. The main activities during union rounds were: handing out the latest union tracts/leaflets and propaganda; updating notice boards; collecting questions for DP/health and safety meetings; requesting/encouraging participation in strikes/actions; encouraging action, for example, writing grievance letters; and more generally speaking to members/workers. There were often multiple aims for the activists on each union round. For example, rounds took place in the weeks leading up to the annual grading negotiations, which are discussed in more detail below. The activists were tasked with collecting grievance letters from workers contesting their grading. They were also tasked with reminding workers of the up-coming workplace elections and this included handing out union leaflets. A number of workers perceived that regional union activists were more ‘present’ at the workplace level than other unions. From the evidence of workers in certain workplace sections it appeared that SUD-Rail dedicated more resources to visiting workplaces. The fact that the union section was second only to the CGT explains to an extent this



dynamic, as activists were motivated to become the first union in the region in the workplace elections of March 2004.

The head of each union section organised the union round for each month. Benoit was responsible for the customer services and operations. For this union section there were on average 10 activists conducting the union rounds at any one time. Benoit delegated workplaces out to activists and each had a list of workplaces or workers to target depending on the rounds. The teams on the rounds were often a mix between experienced and less experienced activists. For example in the union rounds for workplace elections Didier and Helene were each partnered by the less experienced Pascal and Gaëlle respectively. Benoit organised which activists would tour together. There was what appeared to be a form of apprenticeship with more experienced activists training up new representatives on the conduct of union rounds. The activists gave their input on the workplaces they wanted to go to and because of the upcoming workplace elections some of the activists insisted on going to workplaces where they knew the most workers. In relation to this Pascal said:

...I am doing union tours in this area because I have a lot of friends here...as people tend to vote for their friends it is good that I am going on the rounds...it is the person that people vote for not the union...

This is an interesting reflection on the nature of the workplace elections and suggests that for DP and CHSCT representatives a presence in the workplace was considered a key influence in voting patterns. In general the targets for union rounds were members, workers who were supportive of the union and workers who could

potentially benefit from a particular union campaign or action. However, the issues that the activists handled were often ordinary and concerned with the immediate interests of specific workers. The activists talked about the gains they had achieved for workers in their section. For example, Benoit said that they had managed to create a post in a shop which previously had only one employee. He said that they had complained to the employer that if that person needed to go to the toilet or wanted to have a break, they needed to close the shop, but this was not permitted. Benoit said that the DPs had managed to get another post created and some facilities put in and now it was much better. On visiting this workplace the Benoit asked the employees whether they were happy with the facilities and the size of their workspace. The employees discussed in what ways the shop could be improved to make it easier to work in, which included changing the organisation of the workspace so that they were not knocking into cupboards beside their desks. The activists wrote down these issues to present at the DP meeting.

On union rounds the activists talked to workers about the problems they believed would affect workers in the SNCF. In the ticket offices the issue was often the ‘commercialisation’ of the railways. The activists talked about the job losses that would occur as the ‘business’ side of the SNCF was taking work out of the stations and there was greater use of internet and telephone sales. Along the tracks, the activists talked about the decrease in freight traffic, with its transfer over to road haulage, and how this was leading to job losses. The increasing use of less secure forms of employment contracts was also an issue, with activists arguing that the management were trying to divide the workforce by employing more and more contract staff. Approximately half of the employees visited were willing to engage



in conversation about these problems. It was however difficult to translate these discussions into workers' support for the union, but it was an approach by the activists, which allowed workers to voice their concerns and attitudes towards the SNCF, and allowed the activists to present their particular views on the issues.

### *Practicing representative roles: grading negotiations*

This section looks at the lead up to the yearly grading negotiations in order to present the practice of union rounds. The process began in February when management published employee grades for the following year. The grades changes were determined at a national and regional level and were dependant on the financial situation and the existing grading composition of the workforce. There was no consultation with employees or unions before the grades were published and management sent written correspondence only to those workers who had changed grades. The section management had a meeting with the relevant unions six weeks after the publication to discuss and negotiate individual grievances on grading levels. After the publication, the regional union sent out relevant grading information to all employees in the region, encouraging them to write a letter claiming a case for re-grading. The aim was for workers to give the letter to the union activists, who would then send the letters in a batch to regional management. Benoit described the reasons for carrying out this process:

...to let workers know that they have the right to complain about their grading, or lack of grading...it is also to show the employer that we are

here...the letters from the workers have the union stamp on them...they know that we are still fighting...and we have support in the workplace...

However, activists said that another aim of presenting as many cases as possible for re-grading was to ‘annoy’<sup>30</sup> the employer. Pascal said that he had written a letter to his manager contesting his grading level. When asked whether he thought he would get his claim he laughed and replied:

...no...we are all just sent a standard letter saying that we are a valued employee and that we are doing a good job...we do it to annoy the boss really...

As for the grievances for the DP meetings, an aim appeared to be the collection of as many cases as possible to take to the grading negotiations with section management, which took place over a week in the largest union section. Before the grading negotiations began George and Benoit discussed the reasons for collecting the grievances:

George: ...now we have got to go back and go through all 200 odd cases...

Benoit: ...we really are doing it to annoy the bosses...

George: ...no it is the principle of the claims that people are making...

Benoit: ...it is a little bit...

George: ...yes okay that as well...

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<sup>30</sup> The activists used the words ‘enerver’, ‘embeter’ and ‘emmerder’.



In order to collect as many claims as they could, the activists visited workplaces with members encouraging them to write, and stressed the idea to workers that the union would be seen as more of a fighting union the more letters they collected.

In early March the regional union allocated a number of days for representatives to go on union visits to encourage letter writing and to pick up letters already written by employees. After organising which activists would be touring together Benoit went through a list of employees who had been pre-selected as having a case for re-grading. The activists selected the workers and workplaces they wanted to go to, with some protests as to the merits of visiting some workers, because either they were more disposed to another union, or because they knew they were not interested. This was the case for one worker who had a strong case for re-grading from working in his section for three years without a grade increase. The activists said it was 'not worth' visiting however as he was with the CGT. Benoit insisted that they visited the workplace anyway.

In out of town ticket offices the activists' appeared to target younger, mainly female workers, often on lower grades and pay scales. In one incidence, two activists spoke to a young (30s), female worker whom they said had a low qualification for the responsibility attached to her job. The ticket office was in a modern shopping centre where there were three employees (1 female, 2 males) selling train tickets and other SNCF products. Benoit told me that none of them were union members. When the two activists walked into the shop, the female employee greeted them. She knew them by name and the activists said to her that they had come to see her. The activists shook hand with the other employees whilst the female employee picked up

trade union literature from her desk, some of which had the CGT logo. The activist discussed the issue of re-grading with the female employee:

Benoit: ...you should write a letter and claim a higher grade...you have a low grade and you are responsible for the shop... for opening and closing...

Employee: ...yes...we have to close at nine in the evening some nights...I am not happy about working so late...I get home too late...even when I am only working until seven-thirty I get home late...

Benoit: ...the SNCF has to keep the shop open until the shopping centre closes otherwise they get fined for not participating in the life of the centre...

Employee: ...we hardly get any customers between eight and nine...

Benoit: ...you should write a letter about it...

Employee: ...well I want to move to [another ticket office]...I am not sure about writing the letter...

Benoit: ...you should put it all down in a claim letter...what hours you want to work...

Employee: ...yes okay...I will put something down...

The activists waited while the employee dealt with a customer, in the meantime putting up new trade union literature on the staff room union notice board. Benoit also spoke to another employee who was not with a customer. He talked to the employee about the hours they worked in the shop and writing a re-grading letter. The employee talked to him but did not respond on the issue of re-grading. The female employee finished with her customer and talked to Benoit about her working hours. Benoit said again that she should write a letter writing down the hours she



worked and the hours she wanted to work. Benoit and Gerard did not talk to one of the employees, and only gave union literature to the female employee. After having left the workplace, Gerard said:

...they are too afraid to act and they are scared of reproach from the boss...you can see that they are not going to do anything...

Benoit and Gerard went next to a larger and busier ticket office situated in a town centre. There were five employees (3 female, 2 male), each attending to customers when the activists arrived. They went into the back-office staff room and changed the literature on the union notice board. There was CGT literature giving information on the grading process and workplace elections on the staff room table. A female employee came into the staff room and greeted the activists, shaking hands.

Benoit: ...have you got your grading letter...have you seen what your grading is...

Employee: ...here is the letter...

Benoit: ...you should write a claim letter about your re-grading...you have been moved up a grade but because of the way the grading works in the SNCF you are not getting paid any more...

Employee: ...what do I have to do...

Benoit: ...you write the letter saying you want a salary increase...you have been moved up a grade but it comes without more money...you give the letter to us and we will send it to the boss...

Employee: ...okay...

After leaving the ticket office, Benoit said that:

...she did not totally understand what we were saying to her about the grading...she probably will not write a letter...

After two days of union rounds the activists from the section had collected three letters in total, two of them from regional union members. On a round of signal boxes, a CGT dominated area Didier and Pascal said they were disappointed that they had not collected any letters, nor felt that any employee was going to write one. The workers were either supporters of the CGT or could not write a letter because of their employment contract. For example, several employees on a youth contract scheme ('emploi jeune') and PS25 workers were not eligible for re-grading. Didier said he wanted to visit some of the regional union members. They visited an office of administrative employees, which they said was a SUD-Rail stronghold with several members. The two members present had letters for the activists. The activists were able to motivate members to write letters for re-grading, which shows that there was a level of involvement of members in the activities of the union.

In mid-March, after the cases were identified and letters were sent, negotiations took place between section management and the section representatives. In the largest section in the region, there were 7 union representatives from SUD-Rail and 6 from the CGT designated to negotiate with management. The grading negotiations in this section took place over 5 days, where the representatives went through each case being contested with the section management. Benoit said that before the regional



union had been created negotiations had taken place over 2 days, as was the case for most other sections. Negotiations had been extended over the years as the union had put forward an increasing number of cases. There were over 200 cases discussed during the grading negotiations in 2004. Benoit said that their aim was for the negotiations:

...to continue on for as long as possible...

The negotiations lasted 6 days, which meant that the activists had been able to extend the negotiations by a day. On the morning of the first day of the negotiations the union branch organised a rally outside the meeting, composed of union representatives, members, and workers contesting their grading. The regional union activists occupied the first morning of the negotiations, the conduct of which is discussed further in the following chapter. The grading rounds appeared to play several key roles for the union. Firstly, as the grading negotiations fell at the same time of year as the representative elections, they formed part of the union election campaign. The grading charts sent out to workers had publicity for the workplace elections and during workplace tours designated for collecting re-grading claims, representatives took the opportunity to hand out election propaganda and remind employees of the upcoming elections. The representatives argued that the grading process showed that the union was active and provided a service giving out important information to workers. Secondly, the grading rounds were an opportunity for the regional union to stand out from other unions in the workplace. SUD-Rail was the only union who provided a grading 'service' to all employees, which included members from other unions and non-members. The activity used up a lot of union

resources, but could be considered fairly successful as out of the 200 cases presented by the regional union, they succeeded in gaining grade or salary increases for 54 claimants. The activists were happy with this outcome as they said they had put forward a majority of claims which 'did not stand a chance'. Thirdly, the grading negotiations provided an opportunity for the regional union to present their broader demands to management on the nature of the grading system and the fact that contract workers were not included in the system. Again, this is discussed further in the following chapter.

### **Union competition in the workplace**

An influence on union practices in the workplace was the competition between the unions, in most cases, between SUD-Rail and the CGT. In the run up to the workplace elections competition between the unions was most evident, as the union were competing for the votes of the large majority of the workforce. As the majority were not union members, there was the potential for gaining votes from workers who were not union members but who did vote in the elections. Activists discussed how it was difficult to keep motivated when the employees were uninterested, and when the union rounds were badly organised and they ended up following the CGT. During one union round for the representative elections the CGT activists were visiting the same workplaces as the regional union activists. Marie said the CGT had beaten them to it and that it would be annoying to have to follow them around all day, with the CGT having passed by first. Marie and Gérard stopped to talk to the CGT activists and they asked where they were going next. Marie and Gérard said they were on the same route of workplaces. They wished each other good luck



carried on. During the rest of the day the employees mentioned that the CGT had just been in to see them and Marie said it was annoying that they had been there and she was fed up with following them. Gérard said that it was okay there were no problems with it, and they all had their rounds to do. Marie said that it was:

...only because it is the workplace elections that the CGT are around otherwise you never see them...

The presence of the CGT was often the subject for activists on workplace rounds. During rounds for the workplace elections, carried out along the tracks, visiting circulation controllers (signallers), Pascal and Didier were following the CGT activists. They greeted the CGT activists and discussed where they had been and where they were going. The SUD-Rail activists overtook the CGT and after leaving one workplace Didier said:

...you can tell it is workplace election time...normally they are not around...we are in a CGT dominated area round here there is no point staying around too long...

The activists visited a signalling worker based along the tracks. They changed the notice board and spoke briefly to the worker, not mentioning the elections. The CGT activists came in and said that SUD-Rail was taking over space on the notice board. The activist replied saying that the board was half for them and half for the CGT and that it was the CGT who had taken up too much space to start with. The SUD-Rail activists left and Didier said:

...that railway worker is a CGT member...it is not worth staying to talk to him...as I said we are in a CGT area...

There were conflicts between SUD-Rail and other unions in the workplace, which were manifested in correspondence from the CGT and the CFDT, who complained frequently about the practices of the regional union in the workplace. The letter below complaining about vandalism was sent to regional union three weeks before the workplace elections:

It is with anger and indignation that we contact you today to denounce unacceptable practices. We have noted in the last week of February that the CGT notice board...was vandalised by SUD-Rail stickers.

The campaign for workplace elections should not be an occasion for lapses in behaviour in our union world.

The savage practice of sticking up posters annoys a lot of railway workers and it has been like this for 8 years...the fact that these posters are almost impossible to remove without special products is annoying and causes damage.

It is your union partners who are your targets, who, like you, work for the defence of employees and for the SNCF. This situation is unacceptable and we will not let such practices continue.

Faced with a very unfavourable policy towards employees, unity and joint action of union organisations must be privileged in the interest of railway workers who have not been saved by the cuts in our enterprise, the SNCF.



We must work together and respect each other.

This is why today we ask you to take the necessary measures for cleaning our notice board as soon as possible.

In the absence of measures taken in eight days of receiving this letter, we will make this incident known to management.

Another letter complaining about the regional union's written tracts was sent by the CGT a week before the workplace elections:

Dear comrades

I want to contact you to inform you of my indignation after reading an 8-page tract issued by your representatives [...]

By now we were used to being the target of systematic attacks, but today there has been a turning point.

Insulting drawings and writings where you imply that the CGT militants are schemers having personal interests against the security of railway workers!!!! It is unacceptable.

It is important not to mistake the opposition.

The CGT and its militants are not responsible for the setbacks for employees, it is very much the contrary. They fight to improve the situation.

Our objectives seem to be in common, even if sometimes our paths for arriving there can diverge. Without real unity what can we do? It is in our interest for us to show a unitary front [...]

In continuing with the above practices, we can only, in my view, discourage, and maybe amuse a little, but in no case win.

In sections where SUD-Rail and the CGT were evenly matched in terms of representatives and support, tensions were evident. In a DP meeting shortly after the workplace elections, a CGT representative was accused of acting violently towards Benoit. Benoit gave an account of the incident, saying that the CGT 'are jealous that we now have more support than them in the section...he was crazy, I thought he was going to hit me'. The competition between unions and the existence of several unions present in the workplace appeared to put off certain workers. In one ticket office an employee left her desk when the regional activists arrived and said that she was not sure which union the activists were from and what they wanted, but that activists had been passing by all day. She went to take a break and the activists spoke to the remaining employee in the ticket office.

### **Turnover of worker representatives**

The regional union had the expressed aim of a frequent turnover of activists in representative positions. In the regional union statutes 'mandates' for representative positions were limited to six years. The argument used for limiting mandates was that it was a way of avoiding the union representatives becoming 'institutionalised'. In relation to having a 'turnover' in representative positions Jean-Paul said to me:

...the problem with being a permanent representative is that once you start to see the same issues coming up time and again you stop acting if you know nothing can be done...whereas if you have a turnover of activists there will be people less institutionalised and more willing to act...



In order to have a turnover of representatives, Benoit encouraged younger activists to stand for DP or other roles soon after they had become members. In Benoit's section of customer service and operations, Pascal and Gaëlle were standing to be representatives after being members for two years or less. For each elected position there was also a candidate needed for the substitute ('suppléant'). On the lists for elections for 2004 there were new candidates standing for elections, but the majority of executive and council members were on the lists, either for the position of representative or for the substitute. The turnover proved difficult to achieve in practice as there were sometimes no members or activists available or willing to take on representative positions or to participate in union decision-making bodies. Several activists were considered 'exceptions' as there were no members to take their place. Patrick was an example, who, despite going over the limit of six years set by the regional union statutes, had accumulated a number of roles and continued to stand as a representative. He was an employment tribunal judge, a health and safety representative, a DP and a DS. Sylvestre was critical of Patrick's level of involvement in representative positions and said to me that:

...some representatives take on the role to further their careers...for some representatives it means the boss knows you by your first name and it means you are important...

Sylvestre implied to me that this was the reason why Patrick continued as a representative<sup>31</sup>. Another issue with the accumulation of mandates was that activists spent less time working. Sylvestre said that with all of his elected positions, Patrick had only worked 7 days in 2003. In talking about why he was continuing to stand as a representative Patrick said to me that:

...there are a lot of young workers who become members but who do not want to take on the responsibility of being a representative...

This comment points towards a problem for the regional union in relation to encouraging members to take on the responsibility of becoming a representative. The extent of responsibility attached to the representative role, which is made evident in the above discussion, meant that there was an important gap in being an ordinary member and a representative. Even though this chapter has shown that the union activists considered it important to maintain close links with workers, there was a tension in the union's approach towards avoiding institutionalisation.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The chapter shows how the regional union used representative roles as a way of maintaining and developing union organisation and also for transmitting the regional union's adversarial approach to industrial relations to managers, constituents and also

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<sup>31</sup> Sylvestre said to me this was not about Patrick as he did not want to give me a negative impression of anyone, so he said he was speaking more generally about why activists went over the agreed limits for mandates. However, it was evident that the two activists disagreed on the issue and Sylvestre felt that Patrick should give up his mandates.



to other unions. The union was able to avoid institutionalisation to an extent by maintaining a turnover of representatives and by being 'present' in the workplace.

An aim of the SUD movement has been to reconstruct a form of unionism that maintains close links to the workplace and avoids 'institutionalisation' through developing rules for the turnover of activists in representative positions. However, research shows that, the unions were struggling to find replacements for representative positions. The evidence shows that the union considered it important to have a turnover of activists in representative positions, and the regional union was engaged in activities to encourage younger activists to stand for representative positions. The evidence also shows that the regional union activists were successful in putting forward young activists to stand for representative positions. However, there was a high level of responsibility attached to being a DP and 'young workers' were not willing to take on the 'responsibility' of representative roles. The evidence provides some understanding of how activists become permanent representatives. There is also evidence of activists taking up a number of positions at the same time, the 'cumul'. The executive were willing to make exceptions to the limit of a six-year mandate where replacements could not be found.

With low membership levels and access to resources coming mainly from representative institutions, the SUD trade unions have been motivated to invest in their institutional role. The regional union was engaged in a 'power struggle' with the CGT over representative positions. The regional union activists were critical of the CGT in reports from the CE meetings. This was particularly the case in the run-up to the workplace elections, during the period of research, the regional union was

critical of the CGT's running of the CE. The evidence shows that the regional union activists used the reports from workplace institutions to put forward their criticisms of current practices and to highlight the 'union's position'.

The evidence shows that the regional union activists perceived elected worker representatives roles as important for putting forward the individual interests of workers. This was evident in the activists' role as grading representatives, where they attempted to make workers aware of the potential for changing their grading level and increasing their salary. This practice had another aim however, which was to 'annoy' the managers, which again suggests that the regional union was engaged in activities to develop an adversarial approach in the various workplace institutions. The regional union activists considered 'union rounds' as an important activity in the workplace. The institutional positions were used to be able to maintain contact with workers and to collect questions from workers for meetings with management. The training sessions for new DPs highlighted the expectations placed on activists in the conduct of the union rounds. The aim appeared to be the encouragement for new representatives to develop a particular set of activities when on union rounds and in management meetings. In DP meetings, George explained that the union's approach was oppositional and encouraged the new DPs to adopt a similar approach.

Denis (2003) observes a trend in the SUD trade unions towards the development of legal expertise. This trend can to an extent be linked to the origins of the movement, where activists were involved in a legal process for gaining representative status in their respective sectors. SUD-Rail's representative status was contested by the other trade unions and management, which meant that activists had to 'invest' in the law to



be able to achieve representative status (Denis, 2003). The SUD trade unions have developed a practice of drawing on legislation to be able to maintain and develop their organisations. The evidence shows that union leaders sought to make representatives aware of the relevant parts of the Labour Code to help them in their role. This can be seen as a feature of the ‘professionalisation’ of trade union activists, where there was an awareness of the need to develop a certain expertise on the legal rights for representatives and more generally trade unions in the workplace.

## Chapter 8: Developing and sustaining an adversarial approach

### Introduction

In Chapter 1 it was argued that it has become increasingly difficult to develop and sustain collective interests and identity among an increasingly diversified workforce, one that is no longer attached to the collectivist ideologies of the past. In Chapter 2 it was argued that French trade unions have increasingly abandoned ideological and political references for encouraging support, at least at the confederal level. However, the SUD unions have sought to adopt an adversarial approach to industrial relations and have the stated aims to revitalize confrontational practices and militant collective action, thus requiring the continuous mobilisation of workers. This chapter considers the ways in which the regional union developed and sustained an adversarial approach based on a strategy of continuous collective action. The regional union adopted an approach of encouraging frequent strikes, actions and participation in wider social demonstrations. To encourage support for the union and participation the activists regularly produced documents, tracts and propaganda to disperse during union rounds. Whether through tracts, union rounds or during actions the activists were engaged in a continuous process of militant activity and demonstrating an adversarial approach to industrial relations.



## **Union documents and propaganda**

The regional union produced and received a variety of different documents, which formed an important part of encouraging members and workers to develop a sense of collective interests and to participate in collective action. The regional union distributed tracts from five main levels: the 'confederation' level (Union syndicale – Solidaires), the federation, job-specific liaison committees, the regional union and the union section. The regional union also received tracts from outside organisations, which included political parties (for example, LCR, LO) and social movements (for example, ATTAC). The section leaders were responsible for collecting tracts from the regional union office and making sure their activists had the latest tracts. The section leaders were also responsible for producing most of the tracts for their section, which meant they spent a large proportion of their time in the regional union office writing reports from workplace meetings and other tracts, for example, for workplace elections and section actions. In tracts and other documents cartoons and photographs featured prominently. Christophe argued that this made the documents more attractive to workers. The cartoons had as their subject either broader political or specific workplace issues. The majority of photographs displayed on union documents were of demonstrations and striking activists.

The majority of workplaces had a union notice board that was used for tracts and other propaganda materials. The CGT and the regional union dominated the majority of union notice boards. The activists prioritised section and regional union tracts when on union rounds. The number of tracts sent out to workers intensified during the workplace election period. On average workers received around 5 tracts a month

from the regional union. Members received more than non-members and activists received between 10 and 15 depending on whether they were on the executive or the council. There were regular tracts, reports and bulletins that were distributed by the activists. Regional union materials included a bimonthly journal for members, which reported on issues happening in the regional union and workplaces in the region<sup>32</sup>. It was also a space for reporting on wider issues, for example governmental policies and the actions of the employers' federation MEDEF. These were sent to members and were also made available in the workplace. The journal presented issues that regional union activists considered important for members. These included current campaigns and actions, information on union functioning, for example on any proposed changes in statutes before the union congress. Union tracts were also important for announcing strike actions and mobilisations.

Other regular documents produced included the reports from the monthly CE meetings and the bimonthly DP meetings. As was discussed in the previous chapter, even though the DP meetings were designed to deal with individual grievances, it is evident from the reports that the regional union activists constantly sought to broaden the perspectives of workers. The key sources of blame were regional management, the regional director, the director of the SNCF and the government. In the reports there was an emphasis on the 'fight' and 'struggle' of the 'cheminots'. For example in the bimonthly regional union journal before the summer holiday period the lead article was aimed at attributing blame for any problems workers might experience to the government and to employers.

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<sup>32</sup> The 'Flash' was a four page, A3 colour journal. Pictures and cartoons were used throughout, mostly of activists on strike or on demonstrations.



Not wanting to spoil your holidays, in any case it would not be our fault.

- If your spirit is burdened by the oil you have found stuck to your feet in returning from the beach it is the fault of the petrol companies, not us.
- If the pharmacy bill is too high when you buy your cream for helping sunburn it is the fault of the pharmaceutical industry, not us.
- If you cannot leave at the same time as your family it is the fault of the SNCF who do not put enough employees in place to plan holidays, it is not our fault.
- If the train takes you to your holiday village cannot leave because of an electricity cut by striking [electricity workers], it is the fault of [the finance minister], who wants to privatise electricity, not ours.

However, to leave the government and bosses, to decentralise, restructure...to throw out millions of employees on the streets, without reacting, that, understand, that will be our fault.

Convinced that the summer period is the most favourable time for cuts, [the prime minister] and his buddies are going to accentuate the pressure.

Everything is in place to take advantage of the summer to attack social security or the unemployed, who are in their eyes, only lazy and assisted. No, we do not want to spoil well-deserved holidays. We want simply to say that nothing will happen as they want it to. There will be no respite from union action. If we do not do this then yes, it will be our fault.

The government was a frequent target in the journal and other tracts sent out to workers. For weaker union sections, this appeared to be an approach adopted to

encourage support for the regional union. For example, the workplace election tract for train guards was as follows:

25 March 2004

SUD-Rail second union in region speaks out!

But what is this government...who permits itself to raise the finger at railway workers as privileged not deserving any raise in salary for 2003 and wanting to stop the most effective right of expression by imposing a minimum service in six months!...But who therefore is this government who have told us that there is no money for public services and who have just offered more than a million and half to French restaurateur bosses!!! The same government who will soon destroy our social security!! The railway workers are not dupes. They have a conscience, they have a conscience of the French public service! With SUD-Rail a new form of unionism sees the day at [train guards section]. For the defence of agents and the respect of their rights, the controllers have developed a SUD-Rail section.

This was the tract discussed in Chapter 5, written by the new activist, Henri, from the train conductors' section. The activists suggested that this tract was too political and that this was a reason for the lack of success of the regional union in this workplace. The theme of 'struggle' and conflict were contained in a large majority of documents and tracts. Some extract from tracts included: 'it is only the struggle that pays'; 'SUD rail is the union...with the willingness to fight without ceasing'; 'for the defence of public services, all together, we are mobilising'. The extent of the regional union's militant orientation was evident in congress documents, in which



the executive presented a view of broader patterns taking place inside and outside the sector:

In the heart of the SNCF first of all, with the implementation of different phases of reorganisation (separate ticket offices, regrouping of services to be privatised like the maintenance of buildings, electricity, IT, telephone, etc...) the attacks against the status and living and working conditions of railway workers are numerous...In this same period the SNCF's strategy for privatisation has been evident in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> phases of the project for reorganisation...with the opening of railway lines to European transporters, the liberalisation and abandonment of freight...

More generally, it is also in this period that neo-liberal politics, led by the government, have materialised, attacking and reducing workers' rights:

- With the decentralisation of the education system, despite several months of massive struggle by teachers.
- With the reform of civil service pension schemes, after that of private employees in 1993, despite 2 months of strikes and protests.

The referral to attacks against the living and working conditions of railway workers could be interpreted as the leaders' attempts to encourage other activists and members to develop a sense of their wider interests in light of the actions of the government and employers.

## **Practices of mobilisation and direct action**

The regional union activists devised their own statutes independent of the federation level, which could be interpreted as a way of separating the regional union identity from the federation. For the congress of 2004 the regional union activists presented the overall purpose and direction of the regional union as follows:

### **Article 3: Purpose of the union**

- 3.1 To develop union organisation, means of liberating the working class from the exclusion, domination, alienation that the capitalist society subjects them to.
- 3.2 To regroup workers to insure their individual and collective defence.
- 3.3 To create a 'rapport de force' at the enterprise level to defend the professional, economic and social interests of rail workers.
- 3.4 To provide information and training for militants and members on all subjects concerning workers on professional or inter-professional, regional, national or international plans.
- 3.5 To contribute to the development of positions for professional and inter-professional action...

SUD-Rail, from its origins as well as its strategies, reaffirms itself as a fighting union, for the defence of the interests of all railway workers, for a strong engagement in inter-professional action at the heart of the confederation. SUD-Rail has always been a strong force for propositions defending the interests of workers with the greatest unity and transparency.



The regional union's approach could be seen as drawing on 'class-based' notions of trade unionism, with the stated aim of the 'liberation of the working class'. These extracts also demonstrate that the regional union's approach was to defend both the interests of railways worker and wider 'inter-professional' interests. The regional union disagreed with the federation in relation to the importance of militant collective action.

It is on the practice...that we have had the most disagreements. The federal executive's lack of offensive propositions to defend the interests of railway workers and lead actions is a gap in the type of unionism that we have sought to build. Freight is the last example to date.

But despite this, [the regional union] has always been first in line for mobilising and leading different national actions. It is enough to go to any demonstration to see this.

This implies that the regional union activists perceived that they took on a more active role in 'mobilising' and being present in 'national actions' and 'demonstrations'. A form of action frequently carried out by the activists in the regional union was the 'envahissement'. The practice was for activists to interrupt and occupy representative meetings with management in order to put forward the union's demands. In this section I use the term 'occupation' to describe this form of action. The actions provide evidence of the regional activists' militant approach. Over a 6-month period there were five occupations carried out by the regional union.

The occupations lasted from between half an hour to three hours. Two of these actions involved occupying the regional CE. This form of action in part could be related to the regional union activists' frustration with the CE, both in terms of their weaker position in relation to the CGT and in relation to management. The CGT's non-participation in occupying the CE was perceived by some regional activists as evidence that the CGT was not engaged in the 'struggle' for workers. The regional union activists tried to place themselves in opposition to the CGT in order to highlight an identity as a union different from the CGT, and above all engaged in the 'struggle for workers'.

In the first occupation of the CE the grievance was the reorganisation of ticket offices and posts in the customer service and operation section and the second was for the improvement of working conditions for the privatised cleaning workers. Another occupation was at the section level in customer services and operations, where activists interrupted the beginning of the grading negotiations, to put forward demands on the equal treatment for contract workers in respect to grading, and to make individual complaints on the lack of change in grading levels. The fourth occupation was of the regional management offices, where the regional union alongside activists from the CGT intercepted the regional director and the human resources manager on the grievance of freight privatisation. The regional union activists also attempted to occupy the national headquarters for the SNCF, but on the two occasions they attempted this, the security doors of the building were lowered before the activists could enter. The final action was thus an unsuccessful attempt at occupying the headquarters. The grievance on this occasion was the pension entitlements for the contract workers (PS25). However, whilst they were unable to



gain entry the regional union activists used chains and boards to prevent entry to the building.

There were routine practices observed by activists before, during and after the occupations and in regional union actions more generally. The leader activists met at the regional union before the action to pick up flags and stickers, and they then went to the pre-arranged meeting point around half an hour before the action, usually at the nearest station to the action. At the time of the action the group of activist, members and other participants went into the room where the meeting was taking place and the regional union activists stood up when the group entered. The organisers of the occupations were union leaders (Jean-Paul, Benoit, Christophe and Sylvestre) and each of them shook hands with the regional union representatives who were already present in the meeting. Either George or Christophe spoke first and they explained to the managers why they were occupying the meeting. Before the occupations for the works council meetings and for the grading negotiations, union leaders asked members and activists to speak during the occupation, normally those affected by the grievance, and the action was often used as a platform for other demands.

An important practice of union actions was for activists, members and supporters to wear stickers or carry flags with the regional union emblem. For the occupations activists put stickers on the walls of management offices and along corridor walls. Stickers were also put up around the station on the way to the action. Banners were used for actions with slogans on the unions' demands, for example, for the PS25 it was 'equality for contract workers'. Another practice was taking photographs before

and during the occupations. These photographs were then used for regional union documents and notice boards. The pictures appeared to represent a visual tool to show the regional union activists' approach as being one of collective action. An important custom observed during or after actions was the organisation of a barbecue. The regional union owned a van and some of the activists stayed behind to organise the shopping and to bring the van to the place of the action. The activists paid a contribution for the barbecue, and activists from other unions and workers were invited to eat with regional union activists on payment of the same contribution.

During actions the union leaders sought to develop a negative stereotyping of management amongst constituents. In the course of the occupation of the grading negotiations, Jean-Paul explained the positions of managers to members and workers. Christophe and Jean-Paul identified managers by their nicknames. There was a younger manager who they described as being the 'useless one' ('le nul'), an older manager was the 'old one' ('le vieux') and the female human resources manager was known as 'Cruella'. The activists appeared to have an aim to pass on these perceptions of managers to the newer members and to other workers participating in the action. There was evidence to show that managers were frustrated with the form of action developed by the regional union. At the beginning of the occupation of the CE against the reorganisation of posts in customer services and operations, the regional director said:

...this form of action is becoming more frequent and I am not happy about it...it is very disruptive...



In response to this George said:

...it is a way of being listened to...

The occupation concerning freight privatisation also had as an aim to demonstrate the regional union's adversarial approach to the new director of the region. The director had been in place for two months around the date of the action. The action was a national strike relating to freight privatisation but the regional union with the CGT had organised to intercept the new regional director. There were around 100 workers in total with the CGT and the regional union being equally matched in terms of supporters. The activists from the regional union were mainly the executive and council members. The activists attempted to enter the director's office but he said he would meet them in a larger meeting room where the works council meetings were held. The regional union activists stuck stickers up in the room and one younger activist stood behind the director holding a regional union flag smiling and Christophe took a photograph. George and Christophe spoke firstly about the '2000 job losses' from privatising freight. The director replied saying they would not be lost but relocated. Christophe continued and said that there was a general suppression of jobs in the SNCF. The CGT activist started to read out a statement to the director, which talked about the job losses envisaged with freight privatisation. The regional union activists were frustrated with this CGT practice and George interrupted saying they were not satisfied with the director's response and would go to see the national director. After leaving the activists talked about how they thought the regional director would respond to the action. George said to me that he was not

sure how he would react and that they would have to wait 2 or 3 months before getting a response.

Overall George played a key role during the occupations and took a confrontational approach toward managers. For the occupation during the grading negotiations there were around 30 participants, the majority of which were regional union executive and council members, and some activists working near the location of the meeting. There were a few non-members participating, who had written letters of complaint contesting their grading levels. The participants arrived at nine-thirty in the morning and George spoke directly to the section manager. He said they were there because they were not happy with the grading system. The manager responded saying he understood the issues and that they would go through each of the cases. George said that they wanted the whole system changed so they would not have to go through 200 cases in 5 days. The occupation continued for over 3 hours. At 1pm the section manager said they would take a break. George said they would be back at 3pm as they had two hours for lunch. The section manager said it was too late to restart at that time and they would return at two-thirty in the afternoon. George said to the managers that the representatives would still not be back until 3pm.

The action was also used as a space for talking about other grievances. George asked the section manager why the contract workers (PS25) were not on the lists for re-grading. He said that some contract workers had worked for the SNCF for 30 years and had never an increase in pay or grade. The section manager responded by saying that it was not the time to talk about the PS25s. George said it had 'never' been the time to talk about the contract workers. Christophe asked one of his 'PS25 friends'



to speak and walked over to him and said he was there to encourage and support his friend. The activist said that he had worked for the SNCF since 1973 and was now looking for a 'decent pension' on retirement. He said that some contract workers retire with a pension of 600 Euros a month. During the interventions Jean-Paul spoke to some younger activists and said that what they were seeing was an example 'union pressure' ('pression syndicale'). The younger activists were shocked on hearing of the conditions of the PS25 workers and talked to each other about how even young workers move quickly from the lowest grades and that they could not imagine what it must be like to remain at the same grade for so many years.

The regional union activists perceived that it was important to carry out frequent actions. Before actions, mostly those organised at the regional level, the activists undertook rounds of the workplace to encourage support and participation. If an issue in the workplace directly affected a worker, activists would target him or her, explaining that there would be an action to help fight the issue. Regional level activists often talked about how they would present the issue to workers. The arguments used by activists often related to how collective action would lead to salary increases. Relating to this Benoit said to me during the rounds for grading 'if you tell them they will get more money then they will move'. There was however a general concern about the level of participation for the 'occupations', particularly those affected by the issue of the action. This was the case for a scheme for reorganisation in customer services and operations, where the activists said that the reason there was a low turnout of those affected was that workers had been offered money by management to accept the changes and that some workers had taken the money. For the grading occupation there was also a lower than expected turnout, but

the location was 40 minutes away from the regional union office, which may help to explain why the participation was low. The regional union activists often expressed concern for the low turnout and in relation to the strategy that the union should adopt Jean-Paul said to me:

...at the moment it is necessary to motivate the activists and members to act as there has been no action since the strikes of last year...even if they are small struggles at a local level...the union is weak and demoralised...and with the political climate it is necessary to fight...

In discussions activists often complained about what they called a new generation of railway workers who were not easily mobilised. Many of the complaints were over low turnout for general demonstrations on wider social issues not necessarily concerning the railway workers directly. These demonstrations were often on a Saturday and Louis said that:

...people are married....not married...have social activities on a Saturday...they are just not interested...

During discussions on strikes within the sector, the executive debated whether the union should follow other unions' strike actions, mainly the CGT, or whether it should act more on its own. For example, in the run-up to workplace elections the CGT traditionally organised a strike. Sylvestre said to me:



...every two years before elections the CGT organises a strike and we are forced to follow...it has not been announced yet...the aim is to get media attention...if the CGT are left to take action alone...they will get all the media attention...if we see our banner on TV then the goal has been achieved...I am not aware what the motive for the strike is...I think the issue of pensions will be the main motive...

There were joint actions between the unions, particularly at national level and it was sometimes the case that SUD-Rail would follow the CGT's lead to take action. When activists made calls to action at the regional level they were often not supported by the CGT. The activists were very critical of the lack of support from the CGT in actions at the regional level. Many of the regional activists argued that *'the CGT do not care about the interests of the cheminots'*. In a discussion on strikes during an executive meeting Jacques said that:

...there is general agreement that action is needed but activists and sympathisers no longer want to strike when it is an action called by the CGT...

During an executive meeting a motion was put forward from the federation for a debate on whether SUD-Rail should act separately. In deciding what the local union's response would be Jean-Paul said:

...we should say nothing and vote against it...the federation are too lazy to organise anything ...the problem with the union acting on its own is that we

will not be able to get the numbers for strikes...the organisation of strikes would become complicated if there are no joint actions and we will get less people interested if there is a strike by the CGT one day and then three days later we call a strike...

There was an awareness that the union needed to act alongside the CGT, but in order to reinforce the regional union's militant identity, they would often organise a prolonged strike where the CGT called for strikes of 24 hours. The regional union activists criticised the 24 hour strike that was becoming more frequent in the CGT and other unions, and they set themselves in opposition to the practice. This approach appeared to be attractive to some workers and the regional union activists were described as the 'rebels' in the workplace by a young female SUD sympathiser. She said that the regional union's approach was a reason for it attracting so much support from young workers in the SNCF.

The regional union activists often made demands on management to open up negotiations on certain issues and criticised the lack of 'social dialogue' on the part of managers. This was the case on issues decided upon at the national level, such as the structure and distribution of grading levels and promotions, and the terms and conditions of contract workers. The union organised strike actions and mobilisations intercepting management meetings to demand negotiation over these issues. The platform for these actions was often the CE meeting, as this required the presence of regional management, which included the regional director and the human resources director. During a set of actions organised on the working conditions of the PS25 contract workers, the regional union activists demanded that the regional union



director open up negotiations on the status of the PS25 workers. This was a national level issue, but it was brought up in the occupation of the regional CE on 2 March (see Chronology of observations in Chapter 3). As a consequence of this action, the regional union director agreed to meet the regional union activists, delegating the responsibility for the meeting to the regional human resource manager. During the meeting the activists complained that the human resource manager did not have the necessary powers to deal with the issue and they left the meeting early in protest. The regional union director wrote a letter to the regional union complaining about their behaviour:

This issue of [PS25] is not a regional level issue but is dealt with by enterprise level human resource director. However, in a concern to listen and to preserve social dialogue, I agreed that you would receive an audience to discuss the subject...You did not judge it useful to stay in the meeting with the reason that the human resource representative did not possess the necessary powers...I am surprised at your refusal to participate in a meeting that you solicited...In addition, during the brief discussion in this meeting, your delegation was disrespectful towards the human resource representative and their team, who had carefully prepared this meeting; this is unacceptable. In effect, I can not accept verbal or written criticisms from trade union representatives questioning individuals in which I have complete confidence. In light of your position a second meeting on the same subject as the first cannot be justified. Nevertheless, in the spirit of social dialogue...the regional human resource manager will grant you another meeting...

Whilst the union looked towards management to open negotiations, they were often not prepared to negotiate or to sign collective agreements. The leader activists often said that unions signing agreements were ‘collaborating with management’. The regional union activists criticised the CGT’s signing of the 35-hour agreement, which they argued had increased managements’ ability to use worker flexibly. SUD-Rail argued that this outcome showed that there was ‘collusion between the CGT and management’. The signing of agreements was presented to workers as support for reform in the sector, with reform often being linked to privatisation. As one tract for union members implicitly states:

Our desire to closely defend workers’ demands and our refusal to support various ‘reforms’...contrary to the interests of workers and users, makes SUD-Rail a union which is unique on the national landscape.

The CFDT was also viewed as collaborating with employers from their frequent signing of collective agreements. In a tract on the subject, SUD-Rail stated:

The CFDT has fallen drastically after positions taken on the latest reforms lead by SNCF management and the government, and its active collaboration with MEDEF notably on pension reform. This decline, evident in the results of the 2004 workplace elections, and the departure of numerous militants, towards the CGT, UNSA or SUD-Rail, or equally to no union, has been proof of a rejection of this type of unionism by employees.



At the opening of negotiations the union would organise a rally or an interception of the negotiations to increase the pressure on management. This demonstrates that negotiation was part of a broader strategy to engage in militant activity.

### **Defending and mobilising precarious workers**

The regional union was often involved in leading and mobilising precarious workers, such as cleaning and contract workers. The campaign for equal rights for PS25 workers was taken up by Jean-Paul. The campaign was national and the actions involved organising the 670-675 foreign contract workers from all over France. There were actions organised on a monthly basis and during meetings Jean-Paul would report on previous actions and encourage support from the other members for forthcoming actions. As the issue concerned only a few workers in the region Jean-Paul discussed the reasons for the action and campaign during several meetings to justify action to the other activists.

Jean-Paul:...we are organising an action on 5 May to coincide with the human resource directors leaving from [station in Paris] to go to a meeting in Nantes...we are going to block the train and stop it from leaving...the argument is that the [PS25 workers] are condemned to work until the age of 65...this is because if they came to work for the railways when they were 40 they need to work 25 years in order to get a good pension..I am going to write a tract on it...

David:...so what is the objective for the union then...

Jean-Paul:...we need to distribute tracts widely and get our activists to come to the action...

David:...we will need to do a general tract for the workers as well as they will not know what is going on....if a colleague who does the same job as them is on strike they will want to know...the railway workers are not aware of the PS25 problem...

Jean-Paul:...how many do you think you can get from your workplace...there are around 19 where you work...

David:...I did not know there were that many...

Jacques:...should we send a tract to all PS25 workers or just members...

Jean-Paul:...it is a general tract that will be for all PS25 workers...

At the following meeting after this action, Jean-Paul provided a report of what had happened and plans for further action:

Jean-Paul: ...it was a good turnout...there were some who were up for intercepting the train but we decided against it....the next action is on 26 May...we are going to gather outside the management offices to intercept a meeting on the rights of contractuels...it will not do a lot as management are well protected...it will just be a rally...the meeting is not just about PS25 workers but all contracuals...but the issue of PS25 workers is a specific and urgent issue...they leave with a pension which can be 28 per cent of their best 20 years in the railways...this is the first time management has organised a meeting on contractuels so it is important for them...it is an important date....many of them have stayed at Grade A



...around 50 per cent of the PS25 workers...they have not advanced and they have a shit job...there are around 670 left and they will be gone in 5 years so this debate needs to be put forward now....we are supposing failure in the negotiations and have organised an action for 7 June...we will have discussions with the other unions to decide on the action...but we must keep the issue of PS25 workers separate...

Philippe: ...yes but we need to keep it collective with the CGT

Sylvestre:...it has been 30 years that the CGT have not acted for the PS25 workers... they do not care.

Jean-Paul: ...we will continue to mobilise until something is written down...

Philippe: ...yes...but we need to act with others...everyone together you know...

Jean-Paul: ...I am not going to wait for a signature from the CGT before acting...

The entry in the minutes was:

PS25

Next action is 25 May, day of the works council meeting in the region. The delegation will leave the meeting to join the group at [the headquarters]. The objective of the audience of the 25 is to convince management to apply the private collective agreement to PS25 worker, notably in relation to sick days and grading scales, with retirement at 60 years, a leaving bonus with a pension of 75 per cent of their salary. The next general assembly is 11 May and a new action 6 June.

During the lunchtime from this meeting Jean-Paul continued to talk about the foreign contract workers. He said that it was a ‘national scandal’ and that the workers had no rights in the railways. This shows the extent to which the regional union activists sought to further the interests of workers with more precarious contracts and working conditions than those of the core workgroup.

The remainder of this section looks in detail at the union rounds in the week before the occupation of the works council by the cleaning workers. The union rounds and the occupation demonstrate that the union activists struggled to convince many of the cleaning workers of the efficacy of the action as a way of improving their ‘working conditions’. Sylvestre put forward the following proposal during an executive meeting for the proposed occupation of the CE.

#### Cleaning section

An occupation of the regional works council is envisaged on 22 June, at 14h 30 without a strike warning. It is a protest against the working conditions and the changes in working time (...between 1h to 4h). The works council executive will join the rally and a common declaration will be made. A hundred cleaning workers are expected, reinforced by railway workers.

The union rounds to organise cleaning workers to participate in the occupation were organised and carried out by Sylvestre a week before the action. He wrote a tract to hand out to workers:



Tuesday 22 June 2004 at 14h00: Workers from the cleaning companies working for the SNCF who want to make their demands known are invited to join us in front of platform 27 at [station].

Next, we will go, together with railway workers, who are in solidarity with the cleaning section, to see the SNCF's regional director and talk about our discontent.

In effect it is the SNCF regional director who is responsible for the contracts made with the cleaning companies, it is he who chooses the companies and who always takes the lowest cost company without worrying about the conditions of workers who clean the trains, the signal posts, the stations, the offices...

If the company reduces its numbers, contests collective agreements, does not respect existing rights, does not pay overtime, does not supply workers with essential materials and products, it is because it has proposed a contract less expensive than its competitors.

And when the contract is the least expensive it is the workers who pay the difference.

The 22 June at 14h00 we are going to explain to the SNCF regional director what happens in the workplace, we are going to present the situation as it is, without an intermediary, so that at the next bidding round he can choose companies in all knowledge of the consequences.

It is necessary that he knows how the different companies in the region treat cleaning workers.

Everyone wants clean trains and stations but no one wants to pay for it.

22 June 2004 at 14h00 at [station]

Come in large numbers to show the SNCF's regional director that he cannot close his eyes any longer.

We demand that, in place of the lowest-cost company, the SNCF chooses systematically, the best-cost company for employees, meaning those who are committed to respecting legislation and cleaning workers.

It is the SNCF who chooses and who gives orders to the cleaning companies.

It is they who are responsible, it is they who must listen to our demands.

In the tract Sylvestre suggests that occupying the works council would mean the workers would be listened to and their demands could be put forward to managers directly. From the text it is evident that Sylvestre looked towards attributing blame for the choice of the lowest cost companies in the SNCF and the standards of working conditions to the regional management and not to the respective cleaning company managements. With the cleaning section having the second highest union membership in the regional union Sylvestre was in the process of training members and activists to become more involved in the organisation of the section. Abdul, a cleaning worker with two years experience as a member of the union and six months as a DP accompanied Sylvestre on the rounds. This was his first union round and Sylvestre explained what the purpose of the day was:

...we are occupying the works council on the 22 June...we need as many people from the cleaning section as we can get...you need to talk to them as you work in the section...introduce yourself...give out a tract...explain why this is happening...we will go and see a few people in [the main station] first to show you...



Abdul worked nights in a train depot. He was of Arabic origin and in his late thirties. A large majority of the cleaning workers were of ethnic minority origin. Sylvestre invited Abdul to encourage participation because he was a cleaning worker and also of ethnic minority origin. This was the case when Arabic workers did not speak French fluently and he was able to converse with them in Arabic. The cleaning workers were based either in stations or in large depots. The activists gave out tracts to the cleaning workers they passed and then went into a refectory for the cleaning workers, which was underneath the station.

Sylvestre: ...we are going to take pictures of the refectory...it is disgusting...we are going to show the pictures to the boss during the action...

[In the staff room a rat moved out from behind the sink. Sylvestre took a photo.]

Abdul: ...this is awful...

Sylvestre: ...I cannot believe it...a real rat...I am going to take some more photos...[a cleaner entered the room and they shook hand with him]...we are taking photos to show to the regional director next week...here is the tract.

Cleaner 1: ...have you seen the shower room and the toilet...

Abdul: ...no...we will take some photos...show us...[they shook hands with another cleaner working outside the toilet]...do you know about the 22 June...

Cleaner 2: ...no...

Sylvestre: ...they are going to talk to the regional director next week to complain about the working conditions...

Abdul: ...here is the tract...

Cleaner 1 explained to Sylvestre and Abdul that Cleaner 2 did not speak French and he would explain the action to her. Sylvestre explained to Abdul after that Cleaner 1 was a CGT representative. He said:

...he is not happy at the CGT...they do not do anything...he saw that we were acting for them...I think he will soon come to SUD...

The majority of workers that activists spoke to on the rounds were not union members. Sylvestre introduced Abdul to the union representatives in the workplaces they visited. Sylvestre explained that the union was required to nominate union representatives in the companies in order to give protection to activists who were more vulnerable to employer discrimination than public sector railway workers. This was the case with two workers cleaning drivers' over-night accommodation. Sylvestre described this workplace as a SUD-Rail stronghold as the drivers from this depot were mainly with SUD. This had had an impact on the cleaners who were all either SUD members or supporters.

Sylvestre: ...this is Abdul...[they all shook hands and went into the staff room for the cleaners where there were SUD stickers and tracts covering the walls]...I can count on you two for the 22 June...we are occupying the works council...



Cleaner 1: ...yes of course...

Abdul: ...you two have it good here...

Cleaner 2: ...yes we are left alone here because we are with SUD...if I have a problem I use the phone and the problem is sorted out...we had a problem with the fridge this morning...I phoned up the boss and it is going to be replaced by this afternoon...we have got no problems being in SUD...

The activists visited other larger workplaces where there was not as much support for the regional union. One of these was a depot of around 20 cleaning workers. The workers were having lunch when the activists arrived. Sylvestre handed out tracts to each of the tables and said that they would wait until they had finished eating before talking to them. Abdul said to me:

...I feel a little uncomfortable about speaking in front of these people...

Sylvestre handed out the tracts and came over to speak to Abdul:

Sylvestre: ...you can go round once they have finished and talk to them about why the 22 June is so important...

Abdul: ...I am not used to speaking in front of people...

Sylvestre: ...I will show you...[they went over to the group of Pakistani workers]...do you know about the 22 June...here is the tract...it is important for you to be there...this is Abdul he cleans trains at [depot]...he is going to be there...we need to be numerous so the boss can see that we are serious...it is the director of the region that decides what companies run the cleaning...it was him who put [the manager of the depot] as boss...if

you are not happy about that then you should come [the four workers nodded]....you can eat together on 22 June and then come to [station] where we are meeting...you will lose an afternoon's pay but it will be worth it to show the boss that we are serious...

Abdul: ...it is important that you are there...

[The workers nodded.]

The activists moved onto the next table to speak to a group of Arab workers. Abdul greeted all the workers and began talking in Arabic. The workers started arguing with Abdul. Sylvestre asked what the problem was:

Abdul: ...they are saying they supported a strike action with Jean-Paul for three months...they say they gained nothing and do not want to talk or hear about unions...

Sylvestre: ...I understand that but this time if we can show we are numerous then they will have to listen...

[One of the workers replied to Abdul in Arabic]

Abdul: ...it is disappointing that you are not interested...

Sylvestre: ...you should come anyway...here is the tract...it is still important...

Two female cleaner activists from this workplace arrived and Sylvestre told them to continue to speak to the workers and at lunchtime before the action make sure that they had a number of them coming to the action. The two activists said they were not hopeful but that at least they would be at the action. In a much larger depot of



130 cleaning workers there were four SUD-Rail activists. Whilst looking for these activists at the depot, to ask them whether they had been successful in encouraging support for the action, the activists handed out tracts and spoke to workers. Sylvestre used similar arguments for all the groups of workers:

...here is a tract for the 22 June...we are occupying the works council...it is important for you to be there... there used to be 160 people working at this depot and now there are 130...do you think that is normal...the work has not changed...you are doing more work...you will only lose two and a half hours of work and this will stop people like [manager of depot] being your boss...

Sylvestre and Abdul tried to encourage participation in the CE occupation during union rounds over 2 days. In spite of the number of rounds conducted for this action only around 20 cleaning workers participated in the occupation and the majority of these were activists for the regional union in the cleaning section. There were around 40 activists in the occupation, with half of the participants from the executive and council. Sylvestre had expected a higher turnout and was disappointed at the number of cleaning workers participating. After all the participants were in the meeting, Sylvestre held up two boards of photographs and said:

...I have come to introduce you to the cleaning workers...

Sylvestre talked about the low pay and conditions of the cleaning workers, and the fact that it was because of the SNCF taking the lowest bids for cleaning. He asked the director:

...can you put a price on dignity...

The director responded saying:

...it is the law in France and Europe to put out contract for re-bidding...we have to be competitive...

Jean-Paul responded:

...I understand that but there are laws respecting social conditions...these are not upheld...

Two cleaning activists intervened talking about there conditions of work, Abdul talked about having to do extra work and that some cleaners worked 12 days without a break. Abdul also talked about being threatened because he was a trade union activist. The director responded to the intervention saying he would look into the issue. The CE occupation was within six weeks of the action against freight privatisation, and the first action of this kind for the new director. The action could be viewed as an opportunity for putting forward the demands of the cleaning workers and for highlighting the SNCF policy of taken the lowest bid company to a new audience. However, another aim of the action appeared to be for the regional union activists to demonstrate their adversarial position to the new director, and show their confrontational and militant approach. This action was held towards the end of the research period, but there did not appear to be any follow-up to this action.



## Discussion and conclusions

The evidence shows that the regional union was engaged in activities towards constructing an adversarial approach in the workplace. Firstly, from their statutes and the conflict with the federation it would appear that the regional union activists perceived their approach as one focused on organising and participating in actions, both at the regional and national level. Secondly, their opposition towards other unions, mainly the CGT, also appeared to be an important part of constructing their identity. Thirdly, in the content of documents, tracts and propaganda the activists often talked about wider issues affecting workers in order to help encourage workers to develop a sense of issues outside of the workplace. Finally, in the practice of the regional union there were frequent actions that were aimed at ‘confronting’ management. This was evident in the practice of ‘occupations’ by the regional union.

From the kinds of actions developed in the regional union there was evidence of an ability to develop and sustain an adversarial approach. The regional union activists conducted union rounds before actions in order to encourage workers to participate in action. There was also importance placed on providing workers with documents and tracts on the regional union’s activities and justifications for actions. The regional union activists organised actions for the different status workers represented by the union. The calls for actions for the cleaning and contract workers were for maintaining minimum legal standards, for cleaning workers, and the harmonising the rights of contract workers to that of the ‘cheminot’. For the core workgroups the

issues were related more to protecting and defending the existing organisation of posts and more broadly against privatisation. However, participation in actions was predominantly from the regional union activists.



## Chapter 9: Union renewal in France: discussion and conclusions

### **Thesis overview**

This thesis set out with three aims: firstly, to contribute to debates on union renewal through a consideration of the extent and nature of union renewal in France from the emergence of the breakaway union SUD-Rail; secondly, to analyse the social processes underlying the construction of collective organisation and identity and the processes by which collectivism is developed and sustained by workplace union leaders; and thirdly, to contribute to debates on ‘crisis’ and ‘renewal’ in French trade unionism and to gain a greater understanding of the social processes that make up the engagement of French activists. The methodological approaches of ethnography and thick description were chosen as the most suitable methods in relation to achieving these aims and for helping to fill gaps in our knowledge of trade unionism in France. The analytical questions were set out in Chapter 2 and were derived from identifying the ways in which SUD unions have attempted to respond to various dimensions of the ‘crisis’ in French trade unionism, namely the crisis of membership, influence and activism. The SUD unions’ stated attempts to renew unionism have included building mass membership, developing participative democracy and revitalizing confrontational collective action. This chapter reconsiders the questions set out in Chapter 2 in light of the findings presented. The first section considers to what extent and how the regional union was able to construct and sustain collective interests and identity. This involves an application of the organising and analytical

tool of framing to the thick description of union activity in the regional union presented in Chapters 5-8. This section shows how the activists, particularly the *leaders*, were engaged in a continuous process of encouraging other activists and constituents to develop a sense of collective interests and identity, and were constantly concerned with maintaining and advancing union organisation. The second section draws out conclusions from the findings on the extent and nature of union renewal in France. This involves a reconsideration of the specific context within which SUD-Rail has emerged and explores key themes on union renewal in the context of the regional union – that being the ability of the regional union to achieve its aims to build mass membership unionism, to sustain workplace engagement and develop a form of participative democracy. The findings can be analysed in the context of the conditions for union renewal identified by Fairbrother (2000). The conditions for union renewal identified in Chapter 1 were: the recruitment and extension of the membership base; replenishment of activist members; workplace engagement; and participative democracy. The third section considers the broader lessons that can be drawn from this research on the nature of union renewal and revitalization revisiting the work of Frege and Kelly (2003) discussed in Chapter 1. The final section presents the contribution of the thesis and proposals for further research.

### **Constructing and sustaining collective organisation, interests and identity**

To what extent and how was the regional union of SUD-Rail able to construct and sustain collective organisation, interests and identity? The findings support existing evidence and approaches which suggest that leaders and activists play an important



role in constructing a sense of collectivism amongst workers (Batstone et al, 1977; 1978; Darlington, 1994; Kelly, 1998). The findings also support Darlington's thesis that left-wing activists can play a particularly important role in discussions, debates and arguments involved in deciding the most appropriate ways of framing issues around which workers can be mobilised for action (1994; 2001). He argues that politically conscious union activists with an overtly ideological and solidaristic (rather than instrumental and individualistic) commitment to trade unionism can play a crucial role in mobilising workers to take militant action. Some of the regional union activists were also political activists (Jean-Paul for example) and they constantly sought to show workers how specific grievances related to other workers and more generally to the working class movement. Certain disputes in the regional union were related to the differences in political orientations of activists, notably in relation to Jean-Paul and Benjamin. The 'old generation' of activists were perceived as having a political 'formation' which the 'new generation' of activists had not experienced. This political formation took two different forms. Firstly, some activists were members of political parties (Jean-Paul, Philippe) or social movements (Jacques, Sylvestre). Secondly, some activists (Louis, Christophe, George) were not members of political parties or social movements, but they held a strong collectivist orientation and a class based conception of society. These activists' orientations were more influenced by their experiences of work. This was brought out explicitly by George when talking to new DP representatives where he said 'when I first arrived in the SNCF I was nicer... I thought the boss was right...now after many years they have proved the opposite....now I am less nice...with 25 years in the railways I see that every year is peculiar and that they cannot do this or that...'. Whether engaged in a political party or not, these activists adopted an adversarial approach to

management and showed a ‘deep rooted’ commitment to the collectivist principles of trade unionism.

The executive members of the regional union (particularly those categorised as *leaders*) played a key role in encouraging and justifying support and participation in the union. The leaders playing the most important role in this process were those who had a high commitment to unionism and those willing and able to lead other activists and members. The findings have highlighted the difficulties in categorising activists, as depending on the context within which they were acting, the activists in the regional union could be categorised in different roles in different context. In relation to Batstone’s classification, certain activists in the regional union can be more easily categorised as ‘leaders’ from their consistent strong orientation towards unionism and collectivism and their willingness and ability to lead membership (or at least other activists). Jean-Paul, Jacques, Louis, Christophe and George can be categorised as ‘leaders’ using these criteria. However, the majority of other activists could be characterised as playing different roles depending on the context. When certain activists were in the presence of the ‘leaders’ in the regional union, many of them (for example, Sylvestre, Benoit and Marie) could be considered as ‘nascent leaders’. They were younger, more inexperienced activists who were sponsored and brought on by the leaders. They were committed to the wider union movement, but in comparison to the leaders they appeared to have less ability and skills to lead other activists and constituents. In the context of their section level, however, these same activists could be characterised more as ‘leaders’, especially Benoit in the context of leading activists and constituents in his section, and Sylvestre in the context of leading the cleaning workers. Benjamin appears to fit into Batstone’s category of



‘cowboy’ from the strength of his interest in his own section and constituents and lack of participation in the regional union executive. Batstone argues that this category of activist is typically concerned with maximising the short-run earnings of his or her own particular group of members and does not have a high commitment to union principles. Yet, when we look at his role in the new member training, he appears to take on the role of ‘leader’, with his strong collectivist orientation and ability and willingness to lead the new members being trained, none of whom belonged to his section. In the context of the findings from this research, Batstone’s framework is useful for identifying and categorising those activists who adopt a consistent ‘leader’ role. However, from the findings presented in the preceding chapters a more dynamic analysis of the roles of leaders is possible.

Similar to Batstone’s findings, the core of *leaders* played an educational role and were involved in a protracted process of communication, ‘mobilisation of bias’ and ‘systems of argument’ to reinforce the collective interests and identity of the group. An aim of this thesis has been to explore the utility of the framing processes concept for organising and analysing data on the ways in which activists go about building and sustaining collective organisation and identity and in encouraging some level of support from workers. The thick description of activity in the regional union of SUD-Rail provides significant data with which to apply the framing concept. The importance of framing processes as an influence on the nature of trade union revitalization strategies and for developing collectivism in the workplace was introduced in Chapter 1. A discussion of the concept and a way of applying the concept was set out in detail in Chapter 3. It was argued that the critical factor for collective interest definition is for individuals to develop a sense of injustice or

illegitimacy. In addition, individuals must feel that they are entitled to their demands and that there is some chance the situation can be changed. Leaders play several key roles in the process of collective interest definition. Firstly, they use arguments to frame issues so as to promote a sense of injustice amongst workers. Secondly, leaders encourage group cohesion and identity, which encourages workers to think of their collective interests in opposition to their employer. Thirdly, leaders incite and justify the need for collective action and fourthly, they legitimise this action in the face of counter-mobilisation by employers (Kelly, 1998). The evidence allows a detailed examination of how this process was acted out in the regional union.

From the evidence presented in the narrative chapters I identify three sets of framing processes that the activists were engaged in. Firstly, the framing processes between activists, which I term *inter-activist* framing processes. This term is used to explore the internal processes by which activists sought to generate a sense of collective identity and help encourage participation in union activities. Secondly, the framing processes in relation to constituents are termed *activist-constituent* framing processes. This looks at the ways in which activists went about justifying union activity and encouraging constituents (members and/or workers more generally) to develop a sense of collective interest and to encourage some level of support for the union. The third set of framing processes is that relating to other interest groups. Regional union activists were concerned with developing a distinct identity in relation to the federation, management, other unions and wider interest groups, for example, the government, the media and the general public. The different sets of framing processes can be related to Goffman's 'back' and 'front' regions, where the *inter-activist* framing processes can be considered as taking place in the back region



and the *activist-constituent* and other interest group framing processes as being in the front region (Goffman, 1969). The following sections explore the framing processes relating to the generation of a collective identity and encouraging participation.

### *Inter-activist framing processes*

The leaders in the union played an important role in encouraging support and action amongst regional union activists. The leaders helped to promote group cohesion and identity and provided a set of ideologically and politically loaded categories for thinking about the employment relationship, which facilitated the negative stereotyping of management (Kelly, 1997). The leaders urged activists to undertake collective action and were engaged in a continuous process of persuasion. From the research I identify two sets of inter-activist framing processes, firstly, relating to the ways in which union identity was constructed, and secondly, relating to the ways in which activists were encouraged to take responsibility and to engage in union activity. The observations in Chapter 5 suggest that the activists most involved in identity constructions were those categorised as *leaders* (Jacques, Jean-Paul, Louis, Christophe and George). These activists were often engaged in ‘identity talk’, which can be defined as discussions and reflections on how the union functioned and how they perceived its success in relation to other unions in the region. This identity talk can be seen as part of the mobilisation of bias – the internal processes of discussion and debate – to attempt to justify and legitimise the union’s activity and their own positions within the union to other activists. There were frequent discussions between activists relating to the development of the union’s identity and much of the union’s documents contained references to the identity of the union. The union

leaders drew on traditional class based ideological references in order to legitimise and inspire collective organisation and action. The union leaders associated the union with notions of 'struggle', 'action' and 'conflict' in discussions and documents relating to the aims of the union. The purpose of the regional union as set out in the regional union statutes was 'to develop union organisation, means of liberating the working class from the exclusion, domination, alienation that the capitalist subjects them to'. This is a form of frame amplification (Snow et al, 1988) where activists amplified the belief in 'developing union organisation' as a way of achieving the end-goal of 'liberating the working class'. Outside the broader more idealised aims the union's purpose states that they sought to create a 'rapport de force for the defence of the professional, economic, and social interests of railway workers'. They also had as an aim the 'strong engagement in inter-professional action' at the confederal level and to 'action' in 'all areas of social struggle'. This demonstrates that the union's 'collective action frame' was encompassing and sought to mobilise and defend a wide set of issues. However, the processes of constructing the regional union's identity were contested. There were 'frame disputes' between the activists because some executive members were seen not to be upholding features of the union's identity. For example, one of the union's stated aims was to build a 'mass unionism'. For Benjamin and his section the end-goal to construct 'mass unionism' was not being upheld by the union leaders and this influenced their withdrawal from the union executive. Benjamin's section thought the 'principal work' of the union leaders was 'denigrating' the actions of the federation. They argued that this was 'contrary to our principles and statutes which advocate the development of SUD-Rail towards mass unionism'. Nevertheless, the section was committed to 'participating actively in the actions of the regional union', which suggest that they wanted to



participate to uphold the union's identity as a 'fighting union'. This suggests that the frame disputes were about the disjuncture between the ideals and practice, rather than the collective action frame itself.

In discussions between activists and in documents the value of 'democracy' was often amplified as being a fundamental part of the union's identity. In reports reflecting on union activity the leaders referred to the development of 'internal democracy' as one of the reason for the creation of union. In the union's strategy report leaders highlighted the importance of upholding 'democratic principles' as a way of achieving 'grassroots unionism'. The value of democracy was also highlighted in union meetings, particularly in the decision to withdraw mandates when activists had been seen to have acted undemocratically. These democratic values were important motivations for activists' engagement in the regional union. For example, Didier stated that he liked the 'principles of SUD-Rail and that everybody had a place and you could speak out even against the union'. However, there were frequent references to the lack of interest of members in the affairs of the union, where members were considered to 'not give a damn'. This can be interpreted as the activists seeking to legitimise their active role in the context of members' lack of interest. The activists constructed arguments which suggested a sense of urgency and necessity for them to act in the context of members' lack of interest and workers who were afraid to act. This can all be seen as part of the work undertaken by the activists to develop a sense of collective identity and group cohesion.

In relation to Jacques's role in the regional union, he appeared to be engaged in framing processes to help relate regional union activity to the broader social

movement context. This was evident in his inclusion of documents relating to issues outside the union context, and in adding items on 'other organisations' to the agenda. In meetings Jacques often brought up issues taking place in the wider social movement context. The executive members tended to support the campaigns for these movements and their inclusion on the meeting agenda. However, as was shown in Chapter 5 Christophe thought the inclusion of materials on other organisations was 'excessive'. As treasurer the motive appeared in part to be the cost of reproducing the materials for the other members, but he also suggested that the other executive and council members did not read the materials on other organisations. This demonstrates how the process of identity construction was contested. Jacques continued to include the section on other organisations and this can be viewed as an attempt to encourage the other activists to develop a sense of their interests as concerned with wider social issues.

There were framing processes between *leaders* and activists to develop responsibility and engagement in the regional union. The union leaders amplified a sense of duty and the value of democracy in the processes of trying to generate participation from activists. In relation to the participation of union sections, the activity report stated that they 'must...invest...in the common work, for the union' and that the animation of the union 'must not stop' at the section level. The value of democracy was highlighted in stating that 'if we want to work democratically, it is essential that we share all tasks'. The union leaders also stated that activists were expected to engage in the recruitment of members and to encourage existing members to become more involved in the union. Various activities were proposed to encourage worker engagement, including being 'attentive to the problems and the demands of agents,



responding to individual situations, involving members in decision making, and training members to become militants'. The leaders described membership recruitment as a 'permanent task' and related it to the union's 'power' and 'representativeness' and executive members encouraged activists with representative positions to adopt a particular approach towards their representative activities at the workplace level. The leaders demonstrated how the activists should develop an adversarial approach towards managers. George, in the training for the DPs, and Sylvestre, in the session for the cleaning section activists demonstrated how activists should develop an adversarial approach towards management in representative meetings, with the 'right questions' to bring to management being those that were 'against' management. George stated that it was necessary to put 'pressure on the bosses' and he encouraged a negative stereotyping of managers. This negative stereotyping helped to develop a sense of group identity and to justify the militant and adversarial approach adopted by the regional union.

### *Activist-constituent framing processes*

There are two sets of activist-constituent framing processes that can be identified from the findings, firstly, relating to the highlighting of grievances and secondly, relating to encouraging support and participation. Firstly, activists were actively engaged in identifying and highlighting when talking to workers. The identification of grievances and framing them as injustices was an important aim of union tracts, reports and propaganda produced by the activists. The grievances related to both the immediate workplace context and to broader social issues. In the grading rounds Benoit talked to two workers about their grading level and pay, pointing out to one

worker that she had a 'low grade' but was 'responsible for the shop' and to another that she had 'moved up a grade' but was 'not getting paid anymore'. In both cases Benoit said that the workers should write letters to complain about these issues. Benoit attributed the grievances of the workers to 'the grading system and the SNCF'. In suggesting that the workers write letters to give to 'the boss', this implied attribution for grievances to management. Sylvestre highlighted the issue of working conditions in talking to cleaning workers. In the tract for occupying the CE, he identified the cleaning companies as not respecting 'acquired rights' (aquis sociaux) and not paying 'supplementary hours'. In talking to workers he pointed out that 'there used to be 160 people working at this depot and now there are 130'. He stated that the 'work has not changed' and that the workers are 'doing more work'. Sylvestre amplified the necessity of engaging in collective action to show the 'boss that we are serious' and to 'stop people like [manager of depot] being your boss'. It was the 'SNCF regional director' who was attributed as being ultimately responsible for the 'working conditions' of the cleaners. This interpretive work by Sylvestre can be seen as an attempt to encourage workers to shift their perceptions of attribution away from the company or manager they worked for in their 'private companies' towards the 'SNCF regional director', and to highlight the regional director's role in choosing the private companies and the cleaners' 'bosses'. In pointing towards these grievances, both Benoit and Sylvestre could be seen as using arguments aimed at encouraging workers to develop a sense of injustice and to act upon it. The activists tended to attribute blame for grievances to the 'government' and 'bosses'. The activists sought to develop negative stereotypes of employers and the government and they were engaged in a continuous process of encouraging constituents to identify with the social category of 'us' (employees) as against 'them' (government



and management). In a tract before the holiday period in July, the regional union activists attributed blame for hypothetical problems that the constituents may face during their holidays, for example oil on the beach or a cut in electricity to the 'petrol companies' and 'the finance minister' respectively.

The second set of framing processes of activists towards constituents was in relation to encouraging support and participation in the regional union. In order to garner support the activists often framed their identity in opposition to the other main unions in the workplace, namely the CGT and the CFDT. The leaders described SUD-Rail as 'unique on the national landscape' in relation to its 'refusal to support reforms'. The CGT and the CFDT were described as 'collaborating' and 'colluding' with management. The CFDT's 'active collaboration' with management was linked to their decline in elections and 'the definite rejection of this type of unionism by employees'. This shows an active engagement in framing processes towards constituents to legitimise the union and its approach, particularly in relation to other unions.

The evidence has shown that as well as the arguments used by activists to encourage support, the types of activity undertaken by unions can be considered as part of the way in which activists sought to frame their identity and encourage levels of support. The practice of union rounds, new member training, repetitive collective action, as well as the more informal activities including lunch, barbecues and parties, can all be seen as activities with the aim to build and reinforce a sense of collective identity amongst activists, members and workers more generally. As an extension of the framing approach the term 'framing work' can be used to describe the types of

routinised activities undertaken by activists in the processes of constructing collective interests and identity and for encouraging participation.

The volume of literature produced by the regional union for constituents can be viewed as part of the 'work' to construct an identity for the regional union. In much of the literature the union activists drew on ideological references, often using the term 'struggle' (*lutte*). This was most prominently the case with the report from the CE, which was entitled 'Industrial struggles'. In communicating with constituents the activists amplified the belief in the efficacy of collective action and the importance of participation. For example, in presenting the role of the CE, the activists amplified the efficacy of collective action by stating that 'it is collective action that pays'. The photographs and cartoons of striking activists, which were included in the majority of regional union tracts and reports, can also be viewed as part of demonstrating belief in the efficacy of collective action. A sense of the necessity for collective action permeated union tracts.

The 'union rounds' had a dual purpose of carrying out workplace representative activities alongside engaging in framing processes for union support in the workplace, particularly during the workplace election period. The activists relied heavily on resources gained from workplace representative institutions and therefore concentrated their activity on encouraging support for the union in workplace elections. The workplace elections were an important preoccupation for many of the regional union activists, and the systems of argument intensified in the lead-up to the elections.



An important practice for encouraging members to think about their interests collectively was the training for new members, which appeared to have the aim of widening members' perspective on certain issues (such as pensions) and encouraging new members to support the union and participate in activities. Throughout the training session Benjamin attempted to frame issues relating to the immediate work context to broader issues and subjects. In discussing the government's plans to reform pensions, he highlighted the belief that they would be 'creating the poor of the future'. He related the issue to the bankruptcy of the American company 'Enron' saying 'people who had worked there for 40 years had nothing at retirement'. Benjamin's arguments appeared to resonate with the members, which was demonstrated in the reaction 'if it had been explained to us like this there would have been a lot more support for actions'. Another member said that 'if my mates had heard this there would have been a real action against it'. This shows how the activists were able to encourage the development of a sense of injustice and collective interests.

From the findings it is possible to look at the extent to which activists successfully developed a sense of collective interests amongst constituents. During the research period, the regional union lost a seat on the works council, which suggests that the regional union's approach towards the works council had not 'resonated' with workers. However, the experience varied between sections, with one section retaining the majority vote in the elections for both the works council and DPs. The activists often complained about a lack of participation of constituents and members and related this to workers' fear of the consequence of acting, with workers being 'afraid to act' and 'scared of reproach from the boss'. Another reason was workers'

misunderstanding of the issues. There was evidence to suggest that the collective action frames did not ‘resonate’ with some of the private sector cleaning workers because of the outcomes of past experiences of collective action. These workers said to Abdul that they had ‘supported strike action with Jean-Paul for three months’ and had ‘gained nothing’ and did ‘not want to talk or hear about unions’. In the arguments used by Sylvestre he highlighted the fact that the workers would ‘only lose an afternoon’s pay or two and a half hours of work’. It could be argued that the past experiences of workers having ‘gained nothing’ alongside the prospect of losing pay for further the action may have lowered the salience of Sylvestre’s framing processes of highlighting grievances and encouraging action.

#### *Framing processes for other interest groups*

The research shows that the regional union activists sought to frame their identity as a militant union in relation to other unions, management, the government, the media and the general public. The regional union activists organised regular actions to confront managers and to occupy CE meetings. The actions to confront the new director in the region can be seen as an important part of highlighting the union’s militant identity. While the actions were based on forwarding particular grievances, the union activists carried out this action with the further aim to see how the regional director would react. The government was also a key target for blame in written propaganda. Another interest group for the regional union activists’ framing processes was the media. Activists often suggested that the aim of demonstrations and strikes was to attract ‘media attention’ and they perceived that if they did not act, the other unions, mainly the CGT, would benefit from media attention. The activists



sought to encourage mass (public) support for their actions and to highlight the broader issues which could be related to specific grievances. Sylvestre said that if the SUD-Rail banner is on TV then the goal had been achieved. This research shows that the regional union was actively engaged in trying to attract media attention and developing collective action frames for wider public support .

### **The extent and nature of trade union renewal in France**

What do the findings on SUD-Rail tell us about the nature and extent of union renewal in France? This research has shown how the regional union activists were seeking to construct a militant union identity and were engaged in developing and carrying out strategies with the expressed aims of renewing trade unionism. This research highlights that there were particularly encouraging conditions for union renewal in the railways, conditions that are not necessarily present in other sectors. Firstly, the railway sector has traditionally been a highly unionised sector in France, as in other European countries, and railway workers have a strong occupational identity. The occupational identity of railway workers in many European countries has come increasingly under threat in the last decade as moves towards European integration have led to cuts in public expenditure and moves towards railway privatisation. Therefore, in the present conjuncture of trade unionism in the railway sector there is a heightened awareness of collective interests and identity. The need for collective interest definition and identity is urgent and the evidence shows that SUD-rail was active in responding to the current threats. Secondly, the context of guaranteed employment is more favourable for the emergence of new trade unions than in the context of a private company, where economic survival and job security

are not guaranteed (Damesin and Denis, 2005). Finally, trade unions have access to a number of employer funded resources which help to create and embed trade union organisation and activity. Resources are designated for worker representatives, but the evidence shows that unions used these resources to forward their own union identity in a context of competitive unionism. Whilst the resources pertaining to representative positions are available to unions in all large enterprises, public and private (for works councils in companies with 50 or more employees, and for DPs with 10 or more employees), in public enterprises such as the railways, unions are embedded within the organisation to such an extent that they have the strength to ensure employers respect representatives rights and resources, which in turn reinforces the strength, at least in terms of resources for representative activity and maintaining organisation, of the trade unions.

Conditions for union renewal were the extension of membership and a close engagement with the workplace. The regional union was able to recruit young, women and ethnic minority workers and those on vulnerable employment contracts and to engage them to participate in union activity. The executive members sought to encourage new members to become active and to develop union organisation in their sections. Union *leaders* encouraged other activists to organise workers during collective actions and workplace rounds. The union organised sessions for new members with the aim of encouraging awareness of their collective interests. However, the findings show that in general there was limited participation of ordinary members in union activities and the union was unable to build membership beyond a minority of workers. The union's militant approach appeared to be attractive to workers, and when asked, they were generally supportive of SUD-Rail's



strategy of regular collective action. The increase in electoral support to become the majority union in some sections highlights the success of the union's approach. Repetitive collective action was a key strategy observed in the union. Through this strategy the union was able to affect the practice of industrial relations in the region, in the form of prolonging the statutory length of meetings with management (see Chapter 7). In the most successful section, there was a core of *militant/radicalised* activists who were able and willing to confront management and take the initiative to engage in frequent actions and encourage workers' participation. The activists were seen as the 'rebels' of the section and it was suggested that this was why the union was well supported by young workers. The union appeared to be attractive to precarious workers as they were offered help and in some cases protection if they were a nominated *délégué syndicale*. The regional union activists lamented the lack of interest and participation of members and workers, but a level of distance was maintained by the activists, in not informing members over certain issues. The union undertook training for new members which was aimed at encouraging the workers to develop a sense of their collective interests and to help replenish activist members.

The activists sought to develop close links with the workforce to develop a 'grassroots unionism'. From the observations, links to workers were maintained through the practice of regular union rounds in the workplace. The importance attached to these rounds supports the literature which suggests that union activists go beyond their recognised institutional role and seek to create the right conditions for effective mobilisation using the tools made available to them by their institutional position (Contrepois, 2003; Dufour and Hege, 2002). The activists reflected on the need to remain close to workers and considered it important to uphold the rules on

limiting the length of time in representative positions. However, there were signs that the union had difficulties in replacing activists in representative positions and activists often held several positions at once. The ‘cumul’ of positions is a common practice observed in French trade unionism, with the danger being that the more positions held the greater the chance there is for activists to spend a majority of their time on representative duties, cutting off activists from workers.

Activists held a common opposition to management and to other unions, particularly the CGT. These common values were disputed and reaffirmed in the framing processes that went on between activists. From the evidence, inter-union rivalry and the power struggles between unions appeared to be a source of dynamism in the regional union context. The CGT held a majority of seats on the works council which meant that the regional union had little influence in decisions made by the body. The union actively sought to frame its identity in opposition to the CGT with relation to the works council. The activists’ strategy was to gain majority control over the works council, and more generally to increase their workplace election support. A feature already identified in the literature has been French trade unions’ preoccupation with ‘organisational power struggles’ in relation to workplace institutions (Smith, 1987). However, this inter-union rivalry appeared to motivate activists to engage in representative activity to show that they were ‘present’ in the workplace and that they were most adept at representing workers interests. Some constituents perceived the regional union as being the most ‘present’ and the most ‘radical’ union in the workplace and that this had encouraged their support for the union and participation in actions.



Another condition for union renewal is the development of participative democracy. To what extent and how was the union SUD-Rail able to construct and sustain a form of participative union democracy and to avoid an institutionalised and bureaucratic form of unionism? This research highlights tensions in the union's approach towards developing participative democracy. The evidence shows bureaucratising tendencies in the union and a tension between the espoused ideology of democratic unionism and bureaucratic practices. *Leaders* framed the union's identity as democratic and stressed the importance of participation in union activity by members and other activists. There were structures in place for the regular participation of activists and members. The issue of union democracy was a regular topic of discussion in union meetings and a source of tensions between executive members who disagreed on modes of working. Despite reflections on its structures and practices, the union was unable to overcome coercive pressures towards a bureaucratic functioning. This was evident in the way that some decisions were made in the union and the evidence highlighting that the union was dominated by small cliques or by *oligarchy* (Michels, 1915). However, in contrast to Michels' thesis that policy in the union is made by and for the benefit of small groups of permanent officials and leaders, this research shows that many of the policies were for forwarding the interests of marginalised groups such as cleaning and contract workers. Michels also argues that the oligarchy creates interests peculiar to itself, and that these interests are always conservative and that not only will they differ from those of the membership but that the policy adopted will be the opposite of that demanded by the rank-and-file and by the original aims of the association. From the findings it can be argued that the interests defended by the 'oligarchy' were not always conservative and were perceived by some workers to be 'too radical'. Furthermore there was a great deal of reflection on

the policies to be adopted by the union and many leaders actively sought to maintain the policies set out as the original aims of the union.

The factions within the union appeared to provide a check on union democracy. It has been argued that challenges and opposition are important for trade union democracy (Darlington, 1994). The disputes within the regional union were centred on the strategic orientation of the union, often in terms of how far the union should engage in collective action. The conflicts in the union encouraged reflection and debate on the modes of working in the union. However, this ‘identity talk’ slowed decision-making and discouraged the participation of activists in the decision-making processes. Also, in spite of a relatively constant debate on issues surrounding the influence of certain union leaders, the majority of activists appeared to accept the extent of the *leaders’* involvement in the direction of the union and deferred to these activists’ ability to decide on the functioning and strategy of the union. The *leaders* were also dominant in constructing the debates in the union and in the interventions within union meetings which highlights the tensions in the SUD’s approach to developing participative democracy (Pernot, 2003). The union leaders were engaged in inter-activist framing processes to encourage the participation and replenishment of leaders in the union. However, there was a tension observed in the union’s strategy of renewing activists as the union leaders were concerned about replacing experienced activists with less experienced ones.

The findings support existing evidence which suggests that the SUD unions have invested in the institutional sphere and have used legal protections as a resource to maintain and develop union organisation (Denis, 2003). The activists have



developed expertise in rights pertaining to workers and to unions, which is viewed as necessary as employers are unlikely to respect these rights. This has led to a level of professionalization of their activity, where activists developed specialist skills in employment law (Guillaume and Mouret, 2004). This relates to a broader theme in the French literature where authors have argued that collective action is increasingly centred on changing the 'rules of the game' (Denis, 2003; Groux, 1998). In the training sessions for newly elected representative, activists were made aware of the need to know about the rules and rights for unions, representatives and workers. In the process of developing their institutional position and the skills to work within representative institutions the regional union could be seen to be following a similar trajectory as other unions. This pattern can be analysed using the concepts developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) concerning the process of change in organisational fields. The authors argue that there are three types of institutional forces that encourage organisational change, and this helps to explain why organisations tend to become structurally more similar. Firstly 'coercive isomorphism' results from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organisations function. The second force is 'mimetic isomorphism', a process in which organisations copy other organisations. The third force is 'normative isomorphism', which occurs primarily through the professionalization process (*Ibid*). The findings suggest that, because of coercive pressures from the common legal environment, the regional union has tended to take on similar characteristics and act in similar ways as other unions, which to an extent overrides attempts to reverse other possible pressures towards isomorphism, namely those related to mimesis and norms. The unions acquire resources from elected

representatives and the employer is required to organise formal workplace elections and provide resources for workplace representatives. The unions have an incentive to engage in this formal process to gain access to resources and this tends to homogenise the actions of unions. The coercive pressures from the legal environment appeared to undermine efforts by SUD-Rail to confront and change the institutional form and practice of unionism. This has wider implications for union renewal in France, as there are strong coercive pressures for unions to develop similar forms of organisation. This suggests that efforts towards renewing unionism through developing membership and lessening the distance between unions and workers (which is created by the extent of investment of unions in the institutional sphere) is likely to be difficult to maintain without changes to the institutional context of industrial relations.

Nonetheless, the tensions in developing and sustaining regional union organisation and identity were a source of dynamism and a stimulus for constant reflection on the processes of renewal and how they could be sustained. This level of reflection was unable to counteract certain coercive pressures towards institutional isomorphism or the pressures towards bureaucratic functioning, but it meant that there was a constant dialogue on how the organisation was progressing.

### **Broader lessons on the nature and prospects for union renewal and revitalization**

Chapter 1 asked whether there was evidence to suggest that France was becoming less of an anomaly in European trade unionism. The argument of French



*exceptionalism* is based on the enduring traits of low membership density, increasing fragmentation and the political and ideological nature of French trade unionism. Evidence from other European countries suggests that unions have been engaged in a variety of different strategies aimed at revitalizing the union movement (Frege and Kelly, 2003; 2004). The findings from the present research suggest that there are certain tendencies that limit union revitalization which are not evidenced to the same extent in other European countries. The evidence shows that there was no real investment in reforming union structures and that there were underlying tendencies for further union fragmentation. Whereas other countries have engaged in merger activity to pool dwindling resources, the French unions have shown a tendency towards increasing divisions. The unions obtain essential resources from elected positions and this has institutionalised union pluralism. Union pluralism is strongly institutionalised through the regular practice of workplace elections, where unions are engaged in power struggles for the various representative institutions. This reinforces the need to develop distinct identities in the face of competitors seeking to represent the same workers. From the research it was shown that SUD-Rail was actively engaged in constructing its identity in opposition to that of competing unions, with the aim of gaining a higher percentage of votes and power over the works council. The unions agreed on certain issues and engaged in common actions, but SUD-Rail was keen to demonstrate that it had a more adversarial approach to industrial relations than the CGT. The underlying potential for union fragmentation was evident with conflicts and factions between sections in the regional union and between the regional union and the federation level. Sainsaulieu (2006) argues that there is a strong individualist dimension within SUD, which reflects anarcho-syndicalist traditions in French trade unionism. This research has demonstrated how

the tendency towards militants acting individually causes tensions within the union and thus creates the possibilities for further fragmentation. This helps in some way to explain the ways in which union fragmentation comes about in the French context.

Low levels of membership seem likely to persist. The regional union had the stated aim to develop a *mass unionism*, and activists recognised the importance of building membership for union strength. The regional union could be seen to be adopting a strategy of ‘organising’ by fostering activism amongst existing members and amongst workers more generally with the aim to encourage recruitment and the development of union organisation. The union did not invest in specific organising campaigns and there was limited success in recruiting members *en masse*. This can to an extent be explained by institutional context of industrial relation where the system of dual representation allows workers to benefit from union representation without being a member. Workers were reluctant to become members, with one of the reason being that they were represented through the systems of workplace representation. This situation echoes the *free rider* problem (Olson, 1964). It also reflects the union leaders’ attitude towards membership, where low membership was not considered to be as important an issue as workplace election support or participation in collective action. In Chapter 2 the limits to union organising in France more generally were identified. As research has shown in other countries such as Spain and Italy, where there is competitive unionism and strong institutional support for unions, the activists focused their activity on mobilising support and participation for workplace elections. There was less emphasis place on organising and building membership and there were limits to strategies of organising related to institutional context of industrial relations in France.



The evidence shows that the union was engaged in developing coalitions with social movement organisations. Several of the leaders were involved in outside movements and sought to highlight campaigns during meetings and by distributing propaganda to activists and workers. This demonstrates that the union supported a broad and encompassing set of interests. It was not evident however, as to whether this helped revitalize the union as such, but it appeared to provide the regional union with broader networks of support. The union's egalitarian principles and concern for precarious workers were evident in the campaigns for the PS25 contract workers and the private status cleaning workers. The officials of union are on the whole biased towards full-time, male, native born employees and it has been argued that 'the programmes developed in collective bargaining and even more those issues assigned real priority reflect the dominant concerns of these hegemonic groups' (Hyman, 1994: 121). As a counter example to this it was evident in the regional union that the PS25 issue was considered a priority and there was continuous efforts made by the executive members to forward the interests of this group of workers. The other unions were not seen to be as engaged in organising and representing this minority group and this reflects broader observations in French trade unionism where the SUD union have been keen to develop their identity as engaged in supporting social movement activities.

This research shows how SUD-Rail has sought to revitalize the union movement through traditional militancy and collective action. It was evident that the other unions in the research were not engaged in collective action to the same extent as SUD-Rail and were more willing to engage in negotiation with management. This

supports wider observations in French trade unionism, at the least at the national level, where the CGT and the CFDT have been less engaged in collective action and more willing to engage in bargaining relations with employers. However, of the revitalization strategies identified by Frege and Kelly (2003) it could be argued that political action remains the dominant strategy of trade unions in France. SUD-Rail developed a strategy of political action, with the aim of defending 'acquired rights' and obtaining more favourable legislation for workers. This strategy can be explained to a large extent by the sector of activity within which SUD-Rail has formed and the continued influence of the government in aspects of industrial relations in the railways. The findings in this research allow for a comment on the ability of unions in France to mobilise beyond their membership levels. In the regional union the activists were engaged in a continuous process of making workers aware of grievances and injustices, attributing problems to employers and the government and highlighting the efficacy of collective action. It could be argued that the core of politically motivated and engaged activists involved in this process helps to construct and sustain a sense of collective interests and identity, which makes workers more likely and willing to engage in collective action, regardless of whether they are union members. The activists were engaged in frequent strike actions, which concerned only a minority of activists and some members and workers directly concerned by the grievance. In general the union was unable to mobilise beyond a core of activists. However, it could be argued that this constant flow of action at the local level demonstrated to workers the efficacy and possibility of engaging in collective action and may encourage workers to engage in national collective action which follows the local actions which act as a build up to more large scale action.



Union activists focused revitalization efforts on mobilising support in workplace elections and collective action, which was considered to be more important than organising new members, reforming union structures and developing partnerships with employers. The form of collective action included strikes, occupations and demonstrations, both locally and at the national level. The SUD activists have sought to revitalize forms of action which they feel have been abandoned by the other trade unions in the sector, particularly in relation to direct action. The mobilising discourses were founded on a class based analysis of society, and even though SUD-Rail is based in one sector, their identity was based on defending the interests of the wider working class. This suggests that class based unionism continues to be relevant and meaningful to certain workers and that trade union are ‘agencies of class’ (Hyman, 2001b). SUD-Rail was created in conflict for conflict and has been able to sustain a militant identity and mobilise a core of motivated and engaged activists. The regional union was beyond compromise and prioritised collective action over any form of negotiations. The activists were engaged in a continuous process of justifying and encouraging collective interests and action. Yet, the research has demonstrated that beyond the core of activists it was difficult to mobilise members and workers, suggesting that the adversarial approach is not necessarily viable in the long-term. The research also shows how SUD-Rail, whilst embracing an ideology of class opposition, reached a tacit accommodation within the exiting social order through their engagement in workplace representative institutions. This suggests that in the geometry of European trade unionism, French trade unions, whatever their ideological positions, can be seen to be orienting between class and society (Hyman, 2001b).

## Thesis contribution and proposal for further research

Through a case study of a SUD-Rail regional union this thesis has shown how activists make attempts to confront and renew existing practices and structures in trade unionism. Overall, the findings from this research suggest that, in support of existing research on SUD trade unions in various sectors, there has been a partial renewal of trade unionism in the railway sector from the emergence of SUD-Rail. SUD-Rail has been able to influence the industrial relations context and challenge existing trade union identities, practices and organisation. The union has been able to organise previously unorganised workers, replenish activist members, engage workers in collective action and combine an engagement in local as well as more global issues. The research demonstrates how this was achieved through a continuous set of frame alignment processes where activists sought to legitimise and encourage some level of support in the union. Yet, this research also brings to light the tensions in the approach adopted by the SUD unions. To an extent the union could be seen to be *reproducing* features of the very form of unionism that it sought to confront, including low membership levels and tendencies towards *institutionalisation* and *bureaucracy*. However, the complex and intricate nature of the findings make it difficult to present one particular reading of the evidence.

This research could be interpreted as contributing empirical support for the crisis of trade unionism in France. The regional union appeared unable (and perhaps unwilling) to change existing patterns of minority unionism, with a focus rather on developing a politically aware core of activists. There were also tensions in the



regional union organisation, which reflect the tendencies observed in French trade unionism towards political influences shaping the nature of union activity and intra-union factionalism. The adversarial approach developed by the regional union could also be seen as reflecting a problem in French trade unionism of the presence of conflict over negotiation. The activists sought to develop a 'rapport de force' rather than seeking out to develop effective collective bargaining relations with management. Yet, the evidence also appears to contribute empirical support for a particular capacity for renewal in French trade unionism in spite of the internal and external constraints. The regional union activists demonstrated an awareness of the problems affecting the union movement and reflected on the development of their organisation, processes and identity. This research has shown that the activists were engaged in an ongoing process to maintain and develop their identity both internally and externally, with an aim being to represent and encourage support from constituents. Nonetheless, this research shows that there are limits to renewal and revitalization in France which reflect the context of industrial relations and traditions in trade unionism. However, these limits also reflect universal tensions observed within trade unionism between *democracy and bureaucracy* and *movement and organisation*. This research has shown how these tensions are dealt with in the day-to-day of activities in SUD-Rail. The regional union was able to maintain a militant identity focused on conflict and mobilisation, but was unable, in spite of a large degree of reflection and goodwill, to overcome the coercive pressures towards bureaucracy and the need to focus on maintaining union organisation. This research has contributed to debates in union renewal by highlighting and helping to understanding the tensions of developing and sustaining union renewal.

This research has contributed a *thick description* of the social processes underlying trade unionism in France and has attempted to move beyond dominant approaches to studying French trade unions, which have tended to present a simplified portrayal of the strength of trade union organisation, which is often based on quantitative analysis. The research contributes to studies which highlight the dynamic features of local unionism in France and develops the renewal debate by helping us to understanding how the choices and actions of actors mediate and influence the processes towards building and sustaining collective organisation and identity. The thesis has demonstrated the utility of the framing processes concept for organising and analysing the ways in which collective interests and identity are *or are not* developed and sustained. The framing concept has been applied in the context of SUD, but it is more widely applicable. It could be argued that in countries with union movements characterised as similar to France, for example Italy, where there is competitive unionism and a tendency for unions to base their identities around politics and ideology, there may be evidence of similar processes of framing. In thinking about and employing the framing approach in other countries it may help to gain a better understanding of the nature and extent of union renewal. The research highlights that the way in which leaders go about framing what is possible in terms of union action can have an important influence on union identity and strategy. The application of framing processes in other union movements would also be useful for a broader assessment of the utility of the approach and the experiences and the nature of framing in different countries.

It is recognised that the research was set within a particular conjuncture of trade unionism in France. That is, the thesis has attempted to gain a better understanding



of how a local level union of SUD-Rail, which represents a relatively young in the French trade union movement, has sought to develop its approach within a particular set of counteracting forces. This research is limited to exploring these processes within a particular context, in the public sector where unions continue to be strongly organised and there is greater scope for unions to able to construct and reconstruct their identity. Further research on the processes towards trade union renewal in France, particularly in the SUD trade unions, could help to shed more light on the prospects for revitalizing the movement.

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